



Ernestine Pearl Cheatham

September 9, 1947 - September 8, 2026

Newport News, Virginia

Ernestine Pearl Cheatham died in Newport News on September 8, 2026. She was seventy-nine. Born there on September 9, 1947, she grew up knowing the yard as a clock that did not sleep, and she learned a steam table before she learned a highway. A tray, she said, is a kind of sentence: it has to arrive complete.

She spent twenty-eight years in a shipyard cafeteria that fed people who argued about hulls over gravy. She started washing hotel pans that never quite came clean. She ended running a breakfast line that had to catch welders who came in late from a shift that had already been working since dark. She kept extra milk without making a speech about it. When a storm closed the gates she still opened the kitchen, because weather is not an excuse to skip a meal.

She married Howard Cheatham in 1968. They raised a daughter and a son in a bungalow that needed a new porch every twenty years. Howard worked the yard. Ernestine packed lunches that could survive humidity. After he died in 2012 she kept his chair for a year and then gave it to a grandson who needed a place to do homework.

Neighbors remember a woman who brought extra cornbread to a night shift without staying for thanks, who knew which intern needed a second explanation, and who could hear a rice pot without looking. She loved a late-summer tomato, a clean map of the lunch count, and the particular quiet after the last tray. She died in Newport News, in the heat she had always preferred to a clean cold. The line is still moving. Someone else will count the milk.

Services

A gathering in Newport News in the evening. A gift to a shipyard meal fund or a school breakfast program suits

her.

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