



Thelma Joyce Pemberton

April 18, 1942 - September 2, 2026

Washington, District of Columbia

Thelma Joyce Pemberton died in Washington on September 2, 2026. She was eighty-four. Born there on April 18, 1942, she grew up in a city that still had boarding houses at the edges and marble in the middle. She learned a steam table before she learned a monument. A plate, she believed, should arrive complete even when the people eating it were arguing about a vote.

She spent thirty-one years in a federal cafeteria that did not look like the brochures. She would not let a widower be rushed toward a special he had not chosen. She would not let a vendor invent a discount that made the register a liar. After a bad afternoon she sat in the stairwell with the radio off until her hands were quiet. She kept extra coffee for the clerk whose morning had already been too long.

She married Howard Pemberton in 1963. They raised a daughter in a row house that needed storm windows and a son who needed a ride to choir at hours no one should be awake. Howard drove a city bus. Thelma packed lunches and considered a Sunday pot roast a civic obligation. After he died in 2008 she still sat with neighbors who had to renew something and did not know where to start.

Friends remember a woman who would stay seven minutes past closing for a person who had taken two buses, who hated a messy stamp pad, and who said "you're fine" in a way that actually meant the work would get done. She died in Washington, in the brick city she refused to apologize for. The window is someone else's now. The patience she practiced there is harder to replace than a procedure.

Services

A funeral in Washington, then a hall with coffee. A gift to a cafeteria-workers' fund or a literacy program is

welcome.

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