

The Lady Who Shot Lee Morgan

By Larry Reni Thomas

Lee Morgan, the fiery-hot, extremely talented jazz trumpet player, died much too soon. His skyrocketing career was cut short, at age 33, one cold February night in 1972, at a Manhattan club called Slug's when he was shot to death by his 46-year-old common law wife Helen. At the time, Morgan was experiencing a comeback of sorts. He had been battling a serious heroin addiction for years and by most accounts, was drug free.

His gig at Slug's was the talk of the jazz world and was a must-see for all of those in the know. There was always a packed house during his engagements at Slug's. He looked good, sounded great and seemed destined for a fantastic future. Then the unthinkable happened.

How could it be? Why would Helen Morgan, whom almost everyone figured loved Lee more than she loved herself, kill her constant companion? What happened in their decade long relationship that would cause her to do something that devastating to Lee and herself and to Lee Morgan's legion of fellow musicians, friends and fans who adored him?

The only person who could answer such questions is Helen Morgan (aka Helen More). She was arrested that day, February 9, 1972, served time in prison,

released and paroled. She lived in the Bronx, Mount Vernon, and Yonkers, New York, until 1978, when she moved back to her hometown of Wilmington, North Carolina to be near her sick mother who passed in 1980. Helen became heavily involved in the Methodist Church, spent time with her grandchildren, took classes at a local college and received a degree.

No one knew about her past other than her family. She almost never talked about it. Yet, she still had friends in New York, like the late vocalist Etta Jones, whom she would telephone frequently to talk about old times. But almost no one, especially in the jazz scene, knew where she was, or for that matter, cared. Most of them expressed disdain for her, some were quick to call her a cold-blooded murderer.

But how cold-blooded was she? How did she feel about the tragic event? What was her life all about? What caused her to commit a crime that she had to live with most of her life? How did a country girl from rural North Carolina end up in the fast lane?

She talked about her life with Lee Morgan in a rare and exclusive interview in February 1996, about a month before she passed away of heart problems in a Wilmington, North Carolina hospital. Her health had been in decline for years, and she explained that she wanted to do her one and only interview because she wanted to tell her side of the story. She was tired, she said, and knew she didn't have long to live.

Helen Morgan was born in 1926 in Brunswick County, North Carolina on a farm near a town called Shallotte, about 50 miles across the Cape Fear River, from the coastal city of Wilmington. By the time she was 13, the shapely, attractive, talkative, bronze-colored skin, girl had her first child. A year later, she had another child. Both of her children were raised by her grandparents. She left them and moved to Wilmington at age 15 to live with her mother. She said, at that point, she became "disillusioned with men" and was a virgin for a period after moving to Wilmington. When she was 17-years-old, she started dating a local bootlegger who was 39-years-old.

One night she accidentally walked in on him while he was counting money. "It was the most money that I had ever seen in my life," she said, smiling. "He took a liking to me, and I took a liking to the money."

A few months later, they were married. Two years later, her husband drowned and she became a 19-year-old widow. Her late spouse was a New Yorker. When his relatives came down to take care of the funeral, they took her back to New York, when they finished with their business. She arrived in New York, in 1945, with the intention of staying two weeks.

"I found out I couldn't live with his family. They were living downtown in the 50s, on 52nd Street between 9th and 10th. I learned my way around and got a job. And then I began to meet other people, and started going uptown to the clubs. First club was the Blue Rhythm up on 145th Street on Sugar Hill. Little three-

piece band--the drummer, singer and organ player. Della, I can't think of her last name. Let's see, Etta Jones.

I began to meet all these people. You know I could always fit in. Because I was a talker. And I must say myself, I was not bad looking, and I used to fit in very nicely with them. And I would be invited to the after hours joints. But after the clubs would close, that's when you really heard the music. The jam sessions, you know. They would come uptown and really play.

"But, you know, it's funny," she continued, "I met most of the jazz musicians through people who weren't in the jazz world, but was in the dope world. Now, see me--I was a 'hip square.' That's what they called me. Yeah. You see. I didn't use no heroin. Because that was the thing. They called it 'horse'. You know. I knew the people. The people I met were the dope dealers. I would carry it for them because they knew I didn't use it. I met the dope dealers by going to the after hours spots."

It was at the after hours spots that she got the chance to meet and listen to the conversations of some of the jazz musicians. She heard them talk about their lives and their frustrations. Helen was convinced that they used drugs to forget about how the white club owners were using them, especially the ones who made them enter through the back door and the ones who would not allow blacks in the audience. She saw how that affected them and how when they were high off of heroin, situated in the safety of the after hours spots they voiced their

displeasures and problems in a way that they would never do to the outside world.

Helen said that she thought they carried on very "sensible" talks about world affairs and what was happening to blacks at that time. She was impressed with their intellectualism, yet saddened at the same time, because she was convinced that they were all "hurting inside." She said that she felt sorry for them because on stage and in public they were putting on a front or an act that everything was fine when it was obvious that this was not the case.

Helen explained that the musicians talked about how the whites were stealing their music, paying them next to nothing and how the whites were bringing all the heroin to Harlem. It was a sad situation that was an illusion to people on the outside who didn't know any better.

Ms. Morgan, however, saw right through it. "It was like you (the musicians) were living this life. But you really not, you know. You're just going through the motions. You singing. and the only time you are really yourself is when you are playing, singing and then you forget about everything. You go and play. It would be such mournful sounds. You could hear the sorrow in the music. If you listen hard enough you can hear it."

Helen gained great respect for the musicians after her visits to the after hour spots. So much so that she invited them all to her apartment, on 53rd Street, between 8th and 9th Avenues, not too far from Birdland. "Helen's place," she

said, "became a location where they could get a good hot meal." She did not allow any drug use. It was a refuge and a safe haven from the hardships of a jazz musician's life. It was there in her midtown Manhattan apartment, during the early 1960s, where she met the very young Lee Morgan.

"I met Morgan through Benny Green, the trombone player, who I was messing with at that time. Benny brought him around there. And I met him and we talked. And I looked at him and for some kind of reason my heart just went out to him. I said to myself "this little boy, you know."

And I looked at him and he didn't have a coat. I asked him why didn't he have a coat. He just had a jacket. I said, "child, it's zero degrees out there and all you have on is a jacket. Where is your coat?" And he told me he didn't have a coat "cause it was in the pawn shop." He had pawned his coat for some drugs. I told him, "Well, come on, I am going to go get your coat!" He said, "You're going to get my coat?"

And I said, "Yeah, and I'm not going to give you the money! Because you might spend it on drugs. We are going to go and get it!"

She said it was too cold for anybody to be outside without a coat. When she asked Lee where was his trumpet ("his axe") he told her it was in the pawn shop too. Helen asked him how was he going to work if he didn't have an instrument. "How is a carpenter going work without tools?" she asked him and every other jazz musician she saw in that sad shape. But because she said she felt sorry for

Lee Morgan, Helen went and got his trumpet and coat out of the pawn shop.

After that, she said, Lee Morgan "hung on to me."

Lee moved in with her and she "took over total control of Morgan." She fed him, nursed and pampered him, and started to get his show business career back in order. Helen began to try to book him gigs again. She found out that he really wasn't working a great deal because most people knew about his chronic no-shows and his drug habit. He was not working much except for the Jazzmobile on some summer Saturdays, Blue Note studio recording sessions and other assorted functions.

She recalled the time when a well known jazz musician passed and he was asked to play at the funeral. Lee told her that he could not do it because he did not have any shoes. All he had was bedroom slippers. They laughed when he told her that one of his fellow musicians told him, "Damn, Morgan, all God's children got shoes!"

It's not that he couldn't get a gig. Everybody wanted to hire him. They were just worried that he might not show up. Helen became a stabilizing force for Lee, according to her, but she couldn't completely stop him from using drugs. When Lee moved in, he brought a non-musician friend, Gary, with him. She called Gary a "parasite." Ms. Morgan claimed he could not stand her and that he did everything to "make something come between me and Morgan."

She found out that keeping hustlers, hanger-ons, fans, dead-beats and junkies away from Lee Morgan would be something that she would have to deal with for the rest of their lives. She eventually left the apartment and moved into another place. It was around then that her phone calls and her persistence began to pay off. Lee started getting a band together and getting ready to work again. Helen said that most of the club owners said they couldn't depend on him. Some of them had been burned in the past when Lee Morgan was advertised all week to come to their establishment and he didn't show up.

"If he did not have money to get high with then he did not even show up," she said. "Ain't nothing else was on his mind but getting high. Getting high made him normal. He told me that once. He said that Art Blakey was the one who turned him on. Art turned a lot of them on. Lee told me he asked Art how long would the high last? He said Art told him--forever! I am not saying that Art made them use it. I'm just saying that he was the influence. It's making you feel so good. You know. I never thought much of Art because he turned so many of them on to heroin. All of them (the jazz musicians) were on it.

They were raggedy and pitiful. Real pitiful! Pitiful! Oh! But they came to my house and they were made welcome. Unless they were really doggish. I would let them in because they were people and one thing they were a mystery to me because I could never figure out how anything could make you in the dead winter time, zero

weather, take off your your coat and sell it. One time Gary and I was talking and he asked me why hadn't I ever tried heroin."

He said "Well, you missed the essence."

I said "No Honey, I ain't miss no essence. Looking at you'all I see the essence. Looking at you'all is a enough essence for me to not to want it! And looked at me and said 'I guess you right. I guess you right.'"

According to Helen, Lee was a full-fledged junkie at that time, during the early 1960s, he had had his teeth knocked out and had broken some braces that had been in his mouth for years. She told him to clean up so she could try to get him some gigs. She convinced him that he could play again if he quit using so much heroin. Lee Morgan turned himself in to a hospital in the Bronx to beat his heroin habit. That meant that there was no more Gary. She never saw Gary again.

Ms. Morgan found a new apartment in the in the Bronx where Lee moved in to when he came out of drug rehabilitation. It was there in their apartment in the Bronx that she was able to help Lee Morgan get back on his feet. Helen was able to convince most of the club owners that she would personally make sure that Lee would make his engagements. She was extremely proud that she had, in her words, brought him back from near death.

"I'll never forget," she said, "the DJ for the black program was Ed Williams and Ed Williams was in my corner. He did the eulogy for Morgan. And people told me

that he mentioned me. He said, "Regardless to what happened, we can not leave Helen out of this."

He said, "Because Morgan was dead to us before she came on the scene. And she brought him back to us 5, 6, 7, 8 years, you know. She brought him back alive to us."

Mrs. Morgan got him to start dressing neatly again and cleaning himself up. Whenever they would go out or go on the road, she went with him. Lee liked to wear a shirt and a tie and keep his shoes shined, So she made sure all of that was done before he went out for a gig. Helen would iron his shirts for him because she said that he didn't like what they did to them at the laundry. They were seen together a great deal and were often out at other jazz and social events. It was backstage after one of those affairs that she first met the legendary trumpeter Miles Davis, who was an old friend of Lee's. Helen said he was a "nasty."

"When I met him," she recalled, "he said, 'Hello.'" I said, 'Hello.' And he said, "and who are you supposed to be?" I said, 'I'm suppose to be...I am ..I am not supposed to be...I am Helen Morgan!"

"Oh you Lee Morgan's woman, huh?"

And I said, "yes!"

And he said, "I guess you know who I am?" I said, I don't have to know who you are! And he laughed, you know. He say, "I see you got a quick mouth.' And the

words he said was like this, "I don't mess around with bitches with big mouths." That was one of his favorite words. And I said, well I don't consider myself that. But, you know, we ain't got nothing to say to each other anyway because I don't play the trumpet, so I sure can't talk about no music with you, you know."

Lee Morgan's first band, according to Helen, after he got out of rehab, was a very young and highly impressive quintet, one that was exciting live and at the forefront, on the cutting edge of the post-bop, funky soul jazz scene of the late 1960s and the early 1970s. It was known as an adventurous group that went out sometimes and took a few avant garde excursions, but always stayed in that soulful, funky, swinging pocket. His working band consisted of Lee on trumpet, Harold Mabern on piano, Jyme Merritt on bass, and Billy Higgins, drums. The substitutes, whenever there were adjustments to be made, were Cedar Walton, piano and Herbie Lewis on bass.

There was also a young reedman named Frank Mitchell, who Mrs. Morgan said they found in the Hudson River. She was sure that somebody killed him but she didn't say why she thought that way. Frank wrote the tune "Expoobient" from the hit album of the same name. Helen managed Lee's band business and kept them touring on a regular basis to places like California for a month, with two weeks in Los Angeles at Redondo Beach and two weeks in San Francisco.

The band was also booked in Chicago for two weeks and Detroit for two weeks, on their way back to the East Coast where she had work arranged at most of the

major clubs in New York and other cities. She also set up an engagement on the Caribbean island of Antigua that went very well. From roughly 1965 to 1970, Helen was Lee's true and trusted confidant, manager, and spokesperson. If anyone called their apartment and asked him about work, he handed the phone to her. She did the negotiating with the employers, the arranging of airline flights and transportation needs and Mrs. Morgan was the one who made sure they had hotel rooms.

Meanwhile, Lee concentrated on practicing with his band and recording. He let her handle the business end. No doubt he loved and respected her, so much so, he wrote a composition called "Helen's Ritual," which was inspired by Lee watching her take hours getting ready to go out and rubbing generous portions of lotion on her legs and the rest of her body in the process. She was not only the band's manager, she was their cook, coach, cheerleader and probably their best critic.

Her favorite phrase when the band was really playing well was "Go head Morgan! Go head Morgan!" She said Lee would laugh and the people, including the band members would laugh at her, too. Helen didn't care. She kept on saying "Go head Morgan! Go head Morgan!" because it made the band members feel good to know someone was listening and, most importantly because it made her feel good. There was one summer engagement in Rhode Island at the ritzy Newport Jazz festival when the music didn't feel so fine.

"We was at Newport. And they were drinking. All this drinking. I said, you'all aint doing nothing out there. All you sound like little children up there. And I....And they used to say if I didn't say nothing they knew they wasn't doing nothing. And I was just sitting right there looking at them. I said, all you'all sound like little children up there. And then Miles told them and Morgan said, "Yeah, that's what my wife just told me--that I sound like a little child and that we sound like little children." Miles said, "Well, she told you right!"

The good years for the Morgans were when Lee was working and on methadone. Helen was meeting and greeting people who were mostly high-profile, show business personalities who she and Lee would sometimes entertained at their Bronx apartment. They both enjoyed a good party. It was at one of their early morning after-the-set parties that she met an interesting guest. She met the baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan, a tall, crew-cut, white boy sitting on a pillow in her living room amid a sea of black faces.

Given the time and the place, the late 1960s, during the latter stages of the non-violent civil rights movement and the start of the violent end of the movement, Mulligan was more than a bold white boy. He was out of his mind and out of his place. Especially to Helen Morgan, a fast-talking, former farm girl from North Carolina who was definitely at that time, when she and Lee were doing well, living large and in a very fast lane.

"I'll never forget I had a party and Gerry Mulligan came to my house. I didn't know who he was. I didn't know nothing about no Gerry Mulligan, you know. And he was sitting out there....And I seen this white boy sitting out there in the corner. And you know, we have a habit, you know how we say, 'Nigger!' You know how we call each other Nigger, you know. (Laughs) In a minute, you know. And think nothing about it 'cause it was love with us! So I didn't even know when he came in there. But somebody said something and I said, Nigger is you crazy? And I turned around and looked in this white guy's face. And I cut me off. And I said, "Well, I done said it now. I said, Well, who are you? And somebody said, "That's Gerry Mulligan.' And I said, So! (Laughs). And then Morgan came over there and said,"

This is my wife Helen.' I was not one of nicest persons either. I will not sit here and tell you that I was so nice because I was not. I was one who will cut you. I was sharp. I had to be. I had to be sharp. And Gerry Mulligan sat over there and I said well make yourself at home, you know. And he sat over there because in my front room I didn't have no chairs. You sat on pillows and things like that. And he sat and had food. I always had plenty food. You served yourself because I partied too. I was no waiting on nobody. I cooked the food, you know. But it wasn't no waiting on nobody." "One time, a trick I pulled," she continued. "I got some snuff (Laughs) and it was some kind of snuff. And I had this party. (Laughs) and I told them that it was Nigerian coke. They lied and said that they were high.

And it would burn them. I said, hold your head back. Aw, they would jump on it. And it was brown--Nigerian coke. Nigerian coke. And I laughed. Me and my friend did this. And I'd catch them. And they'd never been-- because some people had never been in my house before and they had been coming... I remember seeing two of the people. I didn't even remember them. They remembered me and how much of a good time they had at my house and had I gotten anymore of that coke? And I said, what coke? coke? They said, "that Nigerian coke, you had." I said, Oh no. (Laughs). I say, now you see how people's minds. They weren't high. You know. We had wine. They was high off the wine and smoking reefer. And we had some coke before, but I wasn't giving them all my coke and they didn't have any." Helen laughed when she talked about the happy times when Morgan was making a little money. He made money from the hit LP Sidewinder, but she insisted that he wasted it all on drugs. Mrs. Morgan contended that during that period (roughly 1965 to 1970), Lee was shooting "tremendous" amounts of cocaine. He had taken the usual path of some former heroin addicts, who when placed on methadone, shot cocaine instead because they figured it wouldn't hurt since the white powder was not heroin.

Most of the time it turned out to be like jumping from a boiling pot to a frying pan or exchanging one bad habit for another. In the case of Lee Morgan, it turned out to be, according to her, exactly that and much, much more. He started to run the streets a great deal and sometimes he wouldn't come back to their Bronx

apartment for days. She began to wonder if their wonderful, fun-filled fast times were about to end. It was around that time that Helen began to ask herself : "Did I love him (Lee)? Or did I think he was my possession? And I think part of that might have been my fault because I might have stopped being..I might have started being too possessive or too much like a mother to him.

I was much older than Morgan because he was in his thirties when he died and I was in my forties or late forties. I thought about it because it was like to me, I thought about it. Like I made him. You know. I brought you back. You belong to me. And you are not supposed to go out there and do this. He started seeing this girl and as I understand it now. See I was on him about using so much cocaine. She was using cocaine with him. She was shooting cocaine with him. And you know how long that is. That's pop, pop, pop! with that because it ain't going to last you but a hot minute snorting it and less than that when you shoot it.

So I knew that because he'd be there with me when he'd get it. And I said, You using, you shooting, you using too much cocaine, you know. You using too much. You not eating, you know. And your nerves, you using. And I guess I was beginning to sound like a mother. And this girl, she had been after him for a long time. But when he was out there strung out she wasn't. But once he got himself straight she wanted him. And then they were hanging out, you know. He had somebody (his age) to play with.

I saw her hanging around and I'd go to the bathroom and they would be there, you know. And I said, You better be careful, girl, you know. And I told her, You better be careful, you know." Shortly afterwards, Helen stopped going to the clubs to see Morgan perform. She was still handling his business and they were still living together.

They were still going out together in public and when he was invited to be on several TV specials she accompanied him, not his new girlfriend. This situation perplexed Mrs. Morgan so much that she tried to commit suicide by swallowing poison. Lee was home the evening it happened. He called a cab and took her to the hospital to get her stomach pumped. Once she completely recovered from that ordeal, she sat down to have a heart-to-heart talk with Lee about their shaky future. "The thing we need to do is separate," she told him. "You go ahead and be with her and I'll still do your business.

But what you are doing is not right. I'm not one of those woman that can talk about I'm the main woman and you got somebody else out there. I'm not built that way. That's not me. I'm no main woman if you leaving me here every night by myself and you out there with somebody else!" Mrs. Morgan said she asked Lee to leave and he wouldn't. He was not secure enough to go and live with his new girlfriend, Helen contended, because he had sense enough to know that what he was doing with her would do nothing but bring him down. She was convinced that

she brought him his much sought after stability. She told him that if he wouldn't go then she would and that she was going to Chicago to visit some old friends. Helen also informed Lee that she didn't know when she was coming back and that maybe when she came back he would "have his act together." "I even sat down and talked to the girl at the club," she explained. "I said, I don't want you to think that..I don't know what he is telling you. But you sitting here and I'm telling him to go with you. I'm not keeping him. Begging him to stay. I'm telling him that it's best for everybody around because I feel like something bad is going to happen out of this. And that Sunday he begged me not to go. He said, "Helen, don't go. Don't go to Chicago. I don't want you to go. I don't want you to leave me.

I said, we can't live like this. It's not me. And I didn't go to Chicago. And I told him, you know, Morgan, I'm making the biggest mistake of my life." That turned out to be a profound and a prophetic statement because it would lead to her making an uncharacteristically dumb move for a lady who had been doing the right things up until that point. She continued to stay at home and Lee even came home a night or two after their discussion. But that didn't last long. Before the weekend, he was back in the streets, hanging out with his friend and shooting cocaine until the wee hours of the morning. He was working at Slug's, a downtown club she had booked him in all week that second week in February 1972.

She had promised the club owner, like she had done many times in the past, that he would be there and Lee was there, with his quintet. sounding good and making the news as the act to catch, oblivious to what was about to transpire, unaware that this much-heralded, routine gig at Slug's would be his last. "On that Saturday, I don't know what possessed me. I said, I'm going to Slug's.

He was working down there that whole week. I hadn't been down there that whole week. And I had a gun. He was the one who bought me the gun because he said he don't be home and he wanted me to protect myself. And I put the gun in my bag. And a fellow was staying with me named Ed, Ed was gay. And Ed knew all the musicians and everything you know. And I said, Ed come on and go with me and Ed said no. He said, "Don't go, Don't go down there." I said, no I'm going down there. He said, "I just don't want you to go!" I said, I'm going to stop in Slug's and say hello and then I'm going over to the Vanguard and hear Freddie. I got a cab and went down there and went in Slug's. And Morgan came around there where I was and we was talking and the girl walked up and she said, "I thought you wasn't supposed to be with her anymore." And he said, "I'm not with this bitch, I'm just telling her to leave me alone." And about that time I hit him. And when I hit him I didn't have on my coat or nothing but I had my bag. He threw me out the club. Wintertime. "And the gun fell out the bag," she continued. "And I looked at it. I got up. I went to the door.

I guess he had told the bouncer that I couldn't come back in. The bouncer said to me, "Miss Morgan I hate to tell you this but Lee don't want me to let you in." And I said, Oh, I'm coming in! I guess the bouncer saw the gun because I had the gun in my hand. He said, "Yes you are." And I saw Morgan rushing over there to me and all I saw in his eyes was rage." It was at that point that Mrs. Morgan shot Lee and her whole world changed the moment that shot went off. She said she became extremely panicky and threw the gun on the counter on the bar. Pure pandemonium broke out and the bar's occupants fled.

The police and an ambulance arrived on the scene. Helen sat there in the middle of all this in a complete daze, wondering if this was a dream, or was it a nightmare? "I ran over there and said I was sorry. And he said to me, he said, "Helen, I know you didn't mean to do this. I'm sorry too." "I can remember the cops throwing me out. I went into hysterics and I don't know. It seem to me like everybody must have left. And I don't know where the girl went.

I ain't never seen that girl since. I think she thought she was next. But she never entered my mind. You know, it's a funny thing, she didn't enter my mind. When that gun went off it snapped me back to reality to what I had done. I didn't have a coat. I didn't have a bag. I didn't have nothing. I was just sitting there, you know. Seemed like it hadn't registered. I said, I couldn't have did this. I couldn't have did this. This must be a dream and I'll wake up. I couldn't be sitting here. And then I just went to jail and sat there. "And the next morning I had to go to court. My kids

was upset. They don't know what to think. But the musicians were there. They were there. Everybody kept saying, "Don't worry. Don't worry. Don't worry. We behind you. Don't worry. We'll get you a lawyer. Don't worry.'

I was just going back. Worry about what? And the lawyer told me do not plead guilty. Plead not guilty. I didn't understand that, I said, "Well I killed him. I'm guilty, you know."

So I did what he said--not guilty. And then I went on back. And when they had the hearing, my mother came up. Then that was another...She was in trauma because she couldn't believe it. This is my daughter!

I said, "well, Helen, you got to get yourself together. It's done. You done put yourself in it now. So, you got to get yourself together. You got to get your mind together. You got to get your self together mentally to accept what you have done."

Helen said she spent several weeks on Riker's Island in jail before she realized no one was going to help her except herself. She fired her lawyer after he paid her only one visit and failed to say anything to her after their initial meeting. Her supporters had dwindled down to family members and close friends who stuck with her in and out of prison.

It wasn't until she had been out of New York for almost 20 years, in failing health, back down south in North Carolina near where her life began, that she decided to grant an interview and talk about the sad, tragic event that had shaped her fall

from being "Lee Morgan's woman," a possessive lady in the fast lane, to the devoted, loving, church-going mother and grandmother known as Ms. Morgan. Less than a month after she gave this interview in February 1996, Helen's song came to its coda, its final note, when her weak heart gave out and she died at a hospital in Wilmington, North Carolina, surrounded by her love ones.