

# Rita Reagan, 1940-2023: Norman Studios, Springfield Preservation Champion Dies



**Tom Szaroleta**

Jacksonville Florida Times-Union



Rita Reagan, a preservationist who fought to save Jacksonville's Klutho Apartments and [Norman Studios](#), died Wednesday in Jacksonville after complications from heart surgery. She was 83.

"She was the original Energizer Bunny," said Danielle Reagan Wampler, one of Mrs. Reagan's two daughters. "People could not help but be swept into her orbit."

Mrs. Reagan served for several years as board chairman of the [Norman Studios Silent Film Museum Inc.](#), the nonprofit organization that has been restoring the city-owned Norman Studios property at 6337 Arlington Road. She first got involved with the preservation effort in the mid-'90s and is listed on the group's website as Pro Bono Executive Director.

Eagle Film City Studios opened on the Arlington site in 1916, in an era when Jacksonville was known as the [Winter Film Capital of the World](#). [Richard E. Norman](#) purchased it around 1920 and made silent films there for the next eight years, mostly starring Black casts. A [museum on the site](#) reopened in August after years of renovations with an exhibit focusing on the 1923 Norman Film, "Regeneration."

Mrs. Reagan lived in Springfield for 25 years and was a volunteer head of [Springfield Preservation and Restoration](#), helping to establish that organization's historic museum, Springfield Heritage Center, and leading efforts to revitalize Main Street. She also spearheaded efforts to save the Klutho Apartments building in Springfield, which reopened in 2004.

She was born July 24, 1940, in Cynthiana, Ky., and raised on a tobacco farm. She graduated from Eastern Kentucky University with a bachelor's degree in education and later earned a master's degree from the University of North Florida and a specialist degree from the University of Florida.



She moved to Jacksonville in 1967 with her husband, Harry Reagan. The couple met at Fort McClellan, Ala., and were engaged six weeks later. They were married in 1962.

"She was an amazing wife, mother, grandmother, and community activist," Harry Reagan said. "One of her most recent accomplishments, saving Norman Studios, will impact Jacksonville for years to come."

Mrs. Reagan worked as an English teacher in Duval County Public Schools for 30 years, teaching at John Gorrie Junior High, Raines High School and the former Lee High School, now known as Westside High. She also started the first peer counseling program in Duval County and served several years as the district's student activities director.

**Making history:** [Norman Studios of Jacksonville's silent film era is now on National Register of Historic Places](#)

"Nearly every person I met in Jacksonville gushed about my mom. Whether they knew her from Norman Studios, Springfield, teaching, peer counseling, or any of her other passions, they always sang her praises," said daughter Denise M. Reagan. "We are heartbroken to lose the woman who held our family together and was an intrepid force for good throughout the community."

Mrs. Reagan underwent heart surgery in January but had complications in the months that followed. She entered home hospice care for three months and died Wednesday, according to her daughter, Denise Reagan.

She is survived by her husband, Harry Reagan, daughters Danielle Reagan Wampler and Denise Reagan, grandchildren Carson Wampler, Conner Wampler and Reagan Hoogesteger, sisters Jeanette Smiley and Tracy Whirls and brother Mac Jones.