

Jacob Priester Gillespie

July 4, 1939 – October 30, 2021

Jacob Priester Gillespie, 82, a Foreign Service Officer who served his country for 38 years in capitals both dangerous and delightful, died October 30 in Washington, D.C. Born on the 4th of July in Cairo, Illinois, Jake was raised in Chicago and Baltimore,



graduating from Baltimore City College High School in 1957. Jake joined the Foreign Service soon after graduating from Dartmouth College. He was the youngest of 20 officers sworn in by Edward R. Murrow to the United States Information Agency. His assignments included Accra, Ghana; Bujumbura, Burundi; Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Montevideo, Uruguay; The Hague, Holland; San Salvador, El Salvador; and Madrid, Spain; as well as multiple positions in Washington. He proudly said the purpose of his job was written on the side of its former headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, DC: “Telling America’s story to the world.”

Jake encountered rebellions, coups, a war, and a major earthquake in his foreign assignments. But what Jake remembered most was that his career gave him the chance

to see the world and, especially, meet writers, musicians, and artists he revered. In his early twenties as a young officer, he heard W.E.B. Du Bois address the first International Congress of Africanists, spent time with James Baldwin, and became friends with prize-winning author Anthony Lukas. He loved jazz, and a favorite memory was dancing late into the night to Duke Ellington jamming on piano at a house party. Jake always said Foreign Service Officers must draw on a surprising range of skills over the course of their careers; in his last post overseas, he jumped rope with the King of Spain.

Jake devoured sports. Whether tuning in to static-filled low-signal Armed Forces radio broadcasts or feigning suspense while watching weeks-old video recordings of college basketball games mailed to him, Jake was riveted and devoted for decades. He especially loved watching his children and grandchildren play, even enduring cold, snowy New England spring season lacrosse games. He altered his work schedule during his daughter's seasons to leave early and catch games. Once, when he and Keter Betts were the only adults watching in the high school stands, they started talking and became friends. Years later, Jake hired him, Washington's premier jazz musician, to play at his daughter's wedding. Along with a lifelong college friend, in retirement he held season tickets for local college basketball, ending only when Jake's challenges with mobility made watching the games on television a better choice. In retirement, Jake also worked with FEMA following disasters and volunteered as a reader for recordings for the blind.

Susan Wagner Gillespie was the love of his life. Surprising her in 1961, shortly after meeting on a spontaneously arranged date, he swung out on a branch over a deep gorge and said, "Marry me, or I'll jump." They were married for 59 years, traveled the world, amassed lifelong friends, and grew a family. As an inseparable couple, their kindness and warmth radiated to everyone.

In addition to Susan, Jake is survived by his two children, Jim Gillespie and his wife Kristen, their children Jacob, Kathleen, and Molly; Betsy and her husband Ian Lipson, their three children Jack, Bryson, and Abraham Lipson; and his sister Mary Jane Gillespie.