



Kara Michelle Butterfield

November 17, 1968 - May 12, 2025

With heavy hearts, the family of Kara Michelle Butterfield shares the very sad news that her vibrant life came to a sudden end on May 12, 2025, in Sandy, Utah. Kara was born to Henry H. Hegener and the late Karen L. (Spafford) (Hegener) (Dugue) Burke on November 17, 1968, in Poughkeepsie, New York, the youngest of four children born to her parents. After her parents divorced and each remarried, she was the youngest of seven children in her father's blended family, known as "The Magnificent Seven."

Kara grew up in New York's picturesque Hudson Valley. She graduated from Roy C. Ketcham High School in 1986, attended Dutchess Community College, and then transferred to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, from which she graduated in 1991 with a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration, management, and operations. Shortly after graduating from college, Kara reconnected with her Ketcham classmate, Scott DeSena, and the two set off on a westward adventure together, settling in the Salt Lake City area. They married in 1995. Daughter Kayli Michelle DeSena, now age 25, and son Robert James DeSena, now age 23, formed their family – Kara's absolute pride and joy. Her marriage to Scott ended in 2008, and Kara later married Michael Butterfield, becoming a stepmom to Michael's son, Braxton. Their marriage ended in 2018.

Kara's love of creatures, small and large, and the outdoors began at a young

age, earning her the family nickname “Ribbit” due to her affection for frogs as a preschooler. Early on, she enjoyed camping, catching fireflies, and figuring out what made things – including people – “tick.” Ultimately, these loves came together when she joined the staff of the Utah chapter of The Nature Conservancy as a Protection and Stewardship Specialist, helping to preserve the state’s most cherished assets – its amazing landscapes, habitats, and natural resources. Kara proudly served in this role for nearly 28 years and was a highly respected colleague, valued for her ability to form trusting relationships with landowners and promote the organization’s mission across the varied topographies of the vast state. Kara also pursued professional certifications and endeavors to support the most vulnerable among us, including those experiencing mental health crises and victims of abuse.

Kara’s pastimes evolved throughout her life, from rock climbing, hiking, and skiing to paddleboarding and gardening. She instilled a love of animals in her children, and they welcomed many pets into their home, including dogs, cats, reptiles, birds, and even a poison dart frog, reminiscent of her “Ribbit” nickname. Camping was a lifelong favorite recreation, beginning with trips to the Adirondack and Catskill mountains as a child, and then through the many mountains and deserts of Utah as a partner, parent, and stepparent. Kara was an avid music fan who traveled near and far to see her favorite bands perform live. She also enjoyed sports, whether cheering Kayli in soccer or Bob’s lacrosse team from the sidelines, or watching the NFL and March Madness on TV. She was a devoted fan of the New York Giants, the North Carolina Tar Heels, and Kayli’s alma mater’s team, the Montana State University Bobcats, win or lose. Kara always championed the underdog.

Kara leaves behind a large family and many friends and colleagues devastated by the loss of Kara’s luminescent light in their lives, especially her children, Kayli and Bob DeSena, her stepson, Braxton Butterfield, her former husbands, Scott DeSena and Michael Butterfield, her parents, Henry and

Corinne Hegener, her older sisters, Kim McCleary and Kristyn Kamps, and her stepsiblings, Carolyn Marsh, Laura Mecagni, Michael O'Connor, and David O'Connor. She has been reunited with those who predeceased her, most joyfully her beloved mother, Karen Burke, her guardian angel older brother, Henry "Chip" Hegener, Jr., and her treasured grandmother, Bernice "Nana" Spafford.

A celebration of Kara's life will be held on August 16, 2025, at the Great Salt Lake Shoreland Preserve, a property preserved by The Nature Conservancy. In keeping with her philanthropic priorities, the family asks that in lieu of flowers, donations be made in Kara's memory to The Nature Conservancy. While her body is at rest, her soul and spirit live on through and inspire all who were fortunate enough to know and love Kara. Please share memories, photos, and condolences on this Tribute page.

"There is nothing left to do now but smile, smile, smile."

The Grateful Dead

Tribute Wall

JD

“ I worked with Kara at The Nature Conservancy for 15 years. She was a god-send for this administratively challenged conservationist! NEVER EVER complaining - she cheerfully helped me navigate the details. She was SO GOOD with the landowners putting them at ease with her warmth, humor and competence. Kara was also keenly interested in growing both as a conservationist and person. I will treasure her memory and good works.

Joan Degiorgio - June 20, 2025 at 04:58 PM

MK

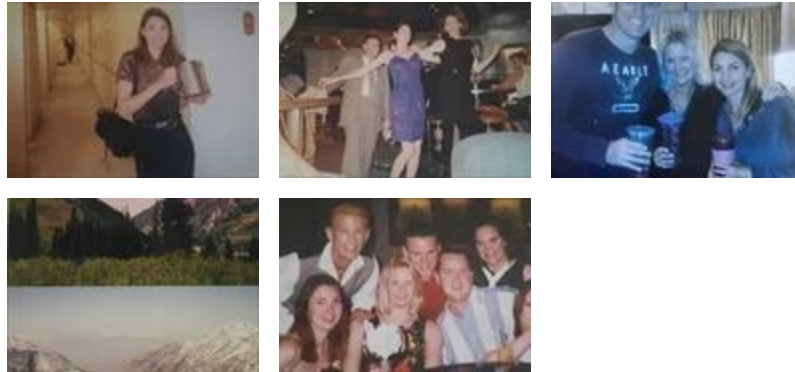
“ A few more pics to share from our trip to visit Kara and family in Sandy (2015). Our kids LOVED all of the adventures with Kayli and Bob on dirt bikes and ATVs in the canyons and we had a wonderful few days in Vegas with both families together.



Michelle Keane - June 10, 2025 at 06:02 PM

MK

“ So many wonderful memories of Kara. She was the best friend a girl could ask for. I met her in 1987 at UNC-Charlotte and we became fast friends. That friendship remained post college through careers, marriages, becoming mothers and many trips together. I miss you terribly Kara...(K'Shell as Karen would call us). I'm sending my deepest condolences to her family and the oh so many friends she made over the years. She will be terribly missed. Kayli, that's you kiddo in 1 of the photos, when I came to meet you not long after you arrived in this world. Your mom was so happy and proud. I remember she told me that she had come "full circle" now that she was a mom...she had completed her life's purpose. Others pics include some trips over the years, weddings and miscellaneous college photos (some are very worn and frayed...and some were too risqué to share heehee)! She was my friend for life and I know I'll be with her again one day. Until then, sweet Kara, rest in peace and take GOOD care.



Michelle Keane - June 08, 2025 at 10:19 PM

KM

Thank you, Michelle, for sharing your memories and photos of these special times you two spent together. I was so happy when you two met at UNCC and had each other to rely on through good times and tough ones, through college and all that followed. You were a blessing in her life. ☐

Kathryn McCleary - June 14, 2025 at 11:47 AM

HH

“ My memories of Kara began when I moved to Poughkeepsie to begin work at IBM in July of 1968 when a few months later we were blessed with Kara's birth. She was a beautiful happy child as other's pictures show. Many happy days of weddings and babies were followed by gatherings of the Magnificent Seven on "the mountain" in Fishkill then to growing children, God's blessing of Kayli and Bob at the Reformed Church of Rhinebeck, a celebration where they were very tired, and a sad time with the passing of Kara and her sisters Mom Karen. Kara spent the greater part of her adult life helping to preserve the environment and thus I am confident that she is now at peace with God.



Hughes Hegener - June 01, 2025 at 08:07 AM

KH

“It was a gift to get to work closely with Kara for the past three years, and I miss her every day both on a professional and a personal level. I so enjoyed discussing ideas with Kara, and I learned so much from her.

I'd like to share something that Kara wrote two years ago. These are Kara's words, unedited:

“One of the most rewarding parts of my job is that land acquisition work was the foundation of TNC and the one thing that stood out to me when I became interested in supporting a conservation organization. The fact that I get to go out and meet with landowners to talk with them about either selling their land or a conservation easement, then get to visit with them year after year to hear about what's been happening and what future plans they have, really helps me understand the value of my work and how I contribute to the overall success of the organization... At our staff retreat, I learned that many staff value my work, specifically, “details, details, details!” I was told that they rely on my attention to detail and knowledge of SOPs when they are working on a project or document. Even if I am not directly involved, I have been asked by teammates if I can take a look at a funding proposal, contract, grant, even email. I had no idea that trait was so highly appreciated by staff until we did that exercise. I also received comments that I keep an upbeat, can-do, positive attitude, even when asked to take on extra tasks. I take satisfaction in helping when and where I can.”

Kara was the ultimate teammate and the backbone of our Conservation Team. Bless those Conversant folks for leading us in a facilitated exercise at the staff retreat such that Kara would walk away feeling the love.

Kelley Hart - May 30, 2025 at 05:24 PM

KE

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Kelley - May 30, 2025 at 05:12 PM

SB

“ There are so many wonderful stories about Kara. She was a loyal friend and dedicated conservationist. She touched the lives of many people in all corners of the state. But one story that stands out is the day we rode horses from Tavaputs Ranch down into Desolation Canyon - deeper than the Grand Canyon - to Rock Creek Ranch. Even experienced riders will tell you this trail is not for the faint of heart. And this was proven true when within about ten minutes of leaving the trailhead one of the horses tripped and rolled down the mountainside. Luckily, neither rider nor horse were hurt so we continued on - Kara out front with rancher Butch Jensen. Kara was fearless and always game for a new adventure. But around 10:00 am when Butch announced "This is were we stop and have a swig of whiskey", Kara quickly responded by saying "Give me that bottle!". After our whiskey break, we all made it safely to the bottom of the canyon in the late afternoon light with new friendships and lasting memories created.

Kara was a kind and gentle person. In fact I always remembered how to pronounce her name with a soft "c" because Kara was caring. She will be missed in so many ways, yet I hope she is at peace.



Sue Bellagamba - May 29, 2025 at 07:18 PM

KM

Thank you, Sue, for sharing that great story about Kara -- so emblematic of the spirit she brought to challenges of all kinds. These are great photos, too. Thank you!

Kim McCleary - May 30, 2025 at 12:20 PM

SB

“ 4 files added to the tribute wall



Sue Bellagamba - May 29, 2025 at 06:58 PM

DL

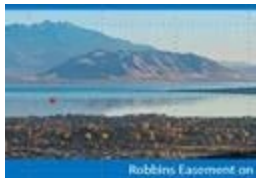
“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Dave Livermore - May 29, 2025 at 03:19 PM

DL

“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



Dave Livermore - May 29, 2025 at 03:18 PM

“When I first started at TNC’s Utah chapter in 2002, Kara was one of the first staff members to make me feel welcome. She had already worn several hats for the small program, including a stint as Dave’s assistant (she had some good stories from that role), and she’d found her sweet spot of working on TNC’s land protection deals and leading the monitoring of TNC’s many conservation easements. Down-to-earth, warm and funny, Kara was an unassuming and skillful ambassador for conservation. She could put skeptical landowners at ease, build rapport with government partners, and make volunteers and supporters feel special. A humble cheerleader, Kara also continuously uplifted her colleagues—generously offering praise, gratitude and encouragement. While she boosted all of us, she often downplayed her own role. But the truth is that Kara was an integral part of TNC’s presence and impact in Utah for decades. Year after year, she was a vital contributor to every land preservation win, and she was tirelessly dedicated to the long-term health of those properties. She was astute, reliable and sharply smart, and she was the chapter’s ultimate source for trusted and accurate details, project history and data. Her genuine love for TNC’s mission was evident in everything she did—from eagerly embracing new technology in easement monitoring to enthusiastically championing TNC’s role in unique projects like the restoration of the Provo River Delta. I loved working with Kara, and even more, I loved knowing her as a friend. Back when we were both much younger, I remember that going out after work with Kara meant guaranteed fun and adventure. She had a beautiful sparkle in her eye and a mischievous sense of humor that kept all of us entranced. Her laugh came easily, and it was infectious. In later years, I cherished Kara’s advice and her stories—both delightful and challenging—of motherhood. She was honest about the hard parts, but she also knew how to find the humor in it all, and she truly soaked up the good moments. As we traded photos and tales of our kids growing up over the years, her boundless pride in both Kayli and Bob, and the deep joy she felt as their mom, beamed from every message we exchanged. Kara had a quiet strength and bravery that touched and inspired all of her friends. I am so grateful

that our paths in life crossed, and I will forever treasure my memories of knowing and loving her. With deepest sympathy, Larisa Bowen



Larisa Bowen - May 28, 2025 at 01:23 PM

KM

Thank you so much for sharing this reflection and tribute, Larisa. I love seeing her through your eyes!

Kim McCleary - May 28, 2025 at 09:02 PM

HH

“ 3 files added to the album Family memories



Hank Hegener - May 24, 2025 at 04:54 PM

KM

“ 34 files added to the album *Family memories*



Kim McCleary - May 23, 2025 at 06:37 PM