

Elizabeth Brackett, longtime 'Chicago Tonight' reporter, dies at 76



Elizabeth Brackett at the WTTW studios on Chicago's North Side in 2012. (Phil Velasquez / Chicago Tribune)

By **Ese Olumhense**
Chicago Tribune

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Chicago television reporter and accomplished triathlete Elizabeth Brackett has died, her former employer WTTW announced Sunday, four days after she was injured in a serious accident while biking on the city's Lakefront Trail. She was 76.

The accident left Brackett, a lifetime resident of Chicago, in a coma and on a ventilator at Stroger Hospital, WTTW announced in [a statement](#) Friday. Her injuries included at least one fractured vertebra, according to the station. She was surrounded by family at the time of her death.

“Brackett, who was also a five-time world champion triathlete, was a tenacious reporter, exceptional writer, skilled and insightful host, and, above all, a valued colleague and friend to everyone who worked on Chicago

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Brackets, born in 1941, did not enter journalism until she was 34. She had tried her hand in politics before then, running unsuccessfully for 43rd Ward Democratic committeeman in 1976, and she had been a social worker in Uptown.

"I decided that if I couldn't win in politics, I was going to try a new line of work," she told the Tribune in a 1990 profile.

"It occurred to me that the same kind of change I had worked for in social work and politics could also be achieved through the media," she said. "And the impact of news coverage on the life of the city seemed to me pretty dramatic. So I decided to totally switch careers and try journalism."

Despite getting a late start, Brackets enjoyed a noteworthy career as a television journalist.

She was also an author, writing the 2009 book "Pay to Play: How Rod Blagojevich Turned Political Corruption Into a National Sideshow" about the former Illinois governor.

Brackets, a mother of two, retired in 2014 after two decades as a full-time correspondent for "Chicago Tonight," covering everything from politics, education, housing and the economy to the environment. She was also a correspondent for the national television series "The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer," covering, among other things, the Challenger disaster, the release of U.S. hostages in Wiesbaden, Germany, and the arraignment of Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega.

Mayor Rahm Emanuel on Sunday called Brackets an institution in Chicago journalism.

"While Elizabeth rightfully received nearly every journalism award under the sun, anyone who knew her knew her passions stretched beyond the bounds of her career and that her greatest treasures were her beloved children. I will deeply miss our conversations about family, politics and triathlons," he said in a statement.

In recent years, Brackets occasionally contributed stories to "Chicago Tonight," according to WTTW, including a June story on Monroe Harbor. Over the years, she was honored many times, winning a national Emmy Award in 1984 for her reporting of the U.S. farm crisis for "NewsHour," a National Peabody Award for her television reporting of the 1988 presidential campaign and two Peter Lisagor Awards for Business Journalism.

"The best thing about journalism is you learn something every day," she told the Tribune in 2012. "It is a chance to watch history and participate to an extent. But there are so many stories that just don't get told."

Brackets also earned an honorary doctorate from Governors State University in 2015.

"A true journalist is a seeker of truth, willing to explore the sometimes dark corners of the human experience, willing to shine a light for the world to see," [the university said at the time](#). "Elizabeth Brackets is such a

Little is known about Brackets's accident Wednesday, which happened on a South Side stretch of the Lakefront Trail near 39th Street. Brackets's family told her colleagues that she was found several feet from the bike trail, which is not far from her South Side home, said Phil Ponce, host of "Chicago Tonight." A still-anonymous good Samaritan saw Brackets and performed CPR until paramedics arrived, according to the station. [Chicago Fire Department](#) spokesman Larry Langford told WTTW that paramedics saw "no signs of trauma, no dirt, bruises, scrapes, contusions, anything that indicated she collided with something or had a fall or struck something."

"We don't know how she got there," he told the station. Her family is hoping to identify the person who performed CPR on Brackets, the station reported Friday.

Brackets is survived by her husband, Peter Martinez, daughter Ilsa Wallich, married to Dennis; son Jon Brackets, married to Laura; stepchildren Lisa Nuzzo, Stephanie Martinez, Jonathan Martinez and Matthew Martinez; sisters Ellen Rieger, married to George, and Jill Swisher, married to Thane; 10 grandchildren; and six nieces and nephews.

Chicago Tribune's Elyssa Cherney contributed.

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