

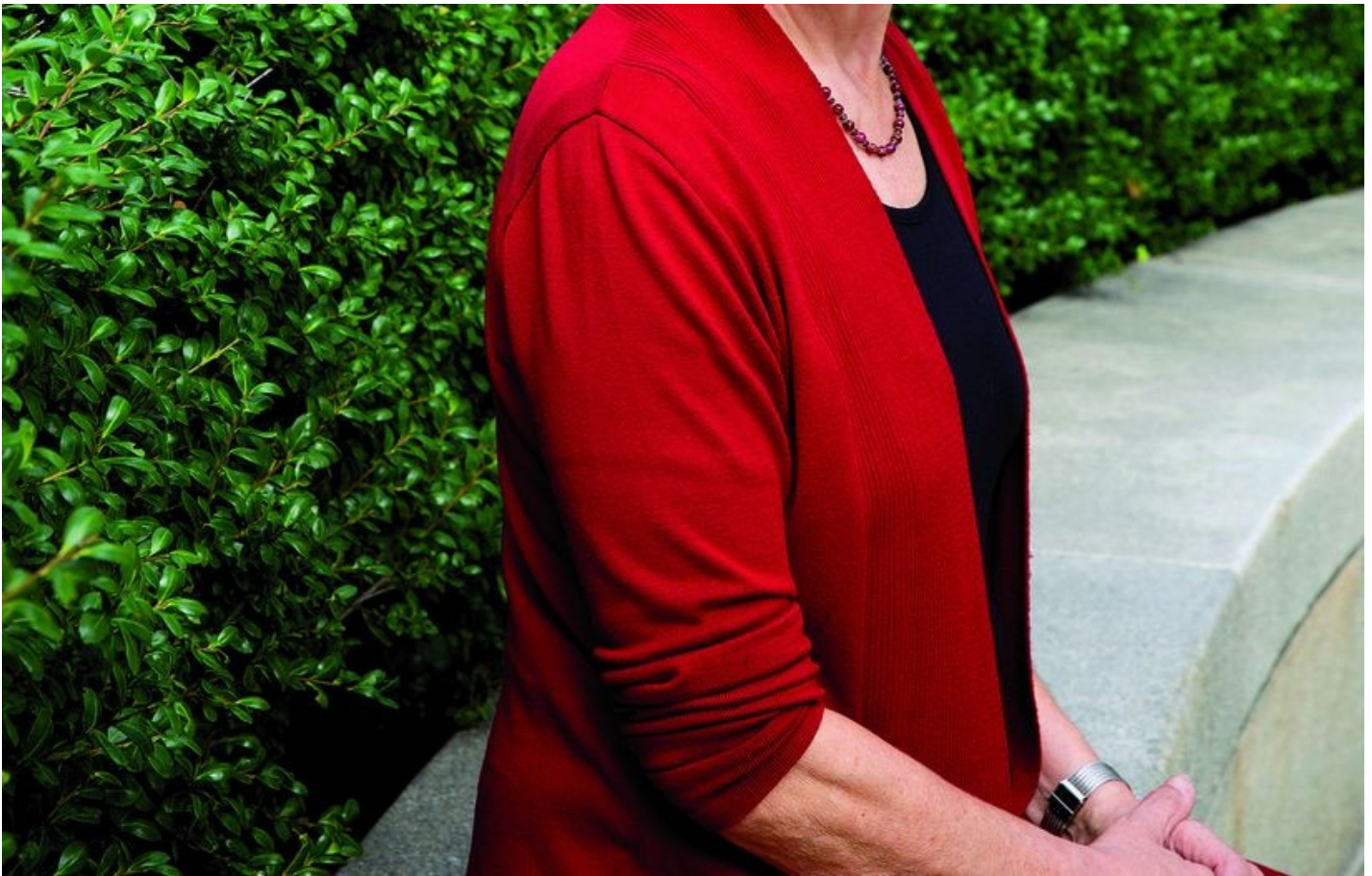
● **BREAKING** TRUMP ORGANIZATION IS NOW BEING INVESTIGATED IN A CRIMINAL CAPACITY, NY ATTORNEY GENERAL SAYS

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Susan Cole, pioneering advocate for traumatized children in schools, dies at 72

By [Bryan Marquard](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 16, 2021, 5:02 p.m.





Susan Cole. (JESSICA SCRANTON)

Susan Cole was already the state’s leading advocate for children whose learning abilities are hobbled by traumatic experiences when she took her work to a new level.

Along with her five students at Harvard Law School’s Education Law Clinic, she began lobbying lawmakers to provide grants to Massachusetts school districts that set up trauma-sensitive environments. Facing difficult odds, they succeeded in getting the proposal added to legislation tightening gun laws, which was signed into law [in 2014](#).

“Five students can change the world,” she marveled in [an interview](#) with the Harvard Law Bulletin later that year, characteristically giving much of the credit to others for work she had pioneered and driven.

Through her work bringing to fruition the Act Relative to Safe and Supportive Schools, Ms. Cole, who was 72 when she died of metastatic breast cancer in her Cambridge home on [May 1](#), turned Massachusetts into an international leader in addressing a barrier to education that had long gone unrecognized.

“What Susan understood was that children’s ability to learn is influenced by their emotional state,” Representative Ruth B. Balser, a [Newton Democrat](#) and psychologist and lead sponsor of the Safe and Supportive Schools act.

“And Susan was a wonderful advocate,” Balser added. “She was relentless in her lobbying and she also taught her students how to lobby. Legislators get the credit when bills pass, but it’s actually people like Susan who make it happen.”

Ms. Cole’s attention to the issue was prompted by an experience she had she was an attorney for [the nonprofit](#) Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

While representing students expelled from Boston’s schools, Ms. Cole sought a diagnosis for a 15-year-old client and was surprised to learn that he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.

At that point, she had already been an advocate on behalf of special education students, but the PTSD diagnosis led her to consider whether trauma of some sort had affected many students who seemed to fall outside typical special-ed categories.

“Trauma is a major problem in our schools,” she told the Globe in 2005, the year she was the principal coauthor of “Helping Traumatized Children Learn,” a [landmark report](#) and guide for educators. “It explains many underlying problems that teachers face every single day.”

In a [2014](#) HuffPost essay, she said it was “time to bring trauma’s impact on learning out of the shadows and make it a regular part of the way schools are run.”

The causes for such trauma, she said in a [2019 essay](#) on the American Association of School Administrators website, can be seen in everything from exposure to domestic violence to bullying at school, violence in the community, or homelessness.

Ms. Cole went on [to found](#) and direct the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, a collaborative effort between Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law

School.

She also founded and directed the Education Law Clinic at Harvard Law School, where she was a lecturer. At the time of her death, she also was a senior project director at Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

“Susan’s work enabled the most vulnerable of our children to have the opportunity and dignity of a meaningful education, one that might have otherwise been denied to them,” John F. Manning, Harvard Law’s dean, wrote in a message to the school community.

“And Susan not only helped make a difference for many individuals,” he added, “she created effective strategies that spurred needed change within entire schools, districts, and state education systems.”

Ms. Cole “was a true champion for kids,” said Ryan Powers, assistant superintendent for the Bridgewater-Raynham Regional School District, and a former elementary school principal in Brockton, where he helped implement approaches her trauma project developed.

Just before the pandemic began, the two traveled to San Diego, where she made a presentation to an American Association of School Administrators conference.

“There was no stone that she left unturned in terms of her work,” Powers said. “She put things in place for kids, but I guess what struck me the most was that it was never at the 10,000-foot level, looking down and saying, ‘Here’s this policy.’ It was, ‘I am going to support you. You can do this work and I’m going to be a resource for you.’ ”

Susan Frances Cole was born in Chicago on Aug. 4, 1948, and at age 5 moved with her family to Milledgeville, Ga., and then to Macon, Ga.

Her mother, Anne Tucker Cole, was a schoolteacher. Her father, Harvey Cole, was a bacteriologist who later opened a toy store.

Growing up at a time when the Holocaust's horrors were becoming better known, and troubled by the South's racism, Ms. Cole "wanted to heal the world," said her husband, [David Eisen](#), a principal at Abacus Architects and Planners.

"I think this was a thread from the beginning to the end of her life," he added.

She spent two years at the University of Georgia before transferring to Boston University, determined to leave the South. "She reveled in the freedom that Boston offered," said Eisen, whom she married in 1986.

Ms. Cole graduated with a bachelor's in social work and later received a master's in special education from the University of Oregon.

She was a teacher at the Walter E. Fernald State School in Waltham when lawsuits prompted improvements for those with developmental disabilities at Massachusetts facilities.

"I think she was deeply affected by that," said Eisen, who added that "she wanted to do things at the policy level. She realized that if she wanted to make real institutional change she would need a law degree."

Ms. Cole graduated from Northeastern University School of Law and had worked for the National Labor Relations Board before joining the Massachusetts Advocates for Children staff.

Through her work at Harvard Law School, Ms. Cole inspired students such as [Michael Gregory](#), who became her collaborator, coauthor, coteacher, and friend.

"Susan was a fierce advocate," said Gregory, a clinical professor of law at the school and senior attorney for the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative. "She knew what her vision was, what her purpose was, and lived that in every minute of her life."

Part of that vision was helping guide the education and lives of students.

“She was a connector,” Gregory said. “Susan couldn’t abide the fragmentation of the world. She wanted to bring everything and everybody together. She wanted people to form relationships and community with each other.”

In addition to her husband, Ms. Cole leaves their son, Ben Eisen of Queens, N.Y., and her brother, Stuart of Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif.

A funeral service has been held and a memorial gathering will be announced.

Despite Ms. Cole’s packed professional life, “she always had a pot of chicken soup at home when we arrived late from New York,” said Ben’s wife, Emily Cohn. “She was always so kind and so welcoming, and at the same time was the kind of person you wanted to make proud and impress because she was so impressive and strong-willed.”

Ben said his mother “had a fighting spirit, I would say, and she was an incredibly warm person.” Her tenacity, he and Emily added, made Ms. Cole’s death feel unexpected.

She was diagnosed a decade ago and was once told she had two years to live, at best. Instead she lived nearly seven more and taught her last class — online, due to the pandemic — nine days before she died.

“She wanted to finish this semester, and she did,” Ben said.

Even online, “the classroom was a very intimate space for Susan,” Gregory said.

During the last class, Ms. Cole set aside time for their eight students to express appreciation for something someone else in the class had done.

“It took up half the class because all of the students had so many wonderful things to say,” Gregory said. “That kind of learning community was really what Susan was all about.”

Bryan Marquard can be reached at bryan.marquard@globe.com.

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jtietjen

5/17/21 - 9:03PM

Thank you for this article that honors her work, commitments, and connections, and I'm so grateful to Susan for her advocacy on behalf of vulnerable students as well as the educational communities that seek to serve them well. In fact, not just students made vulnerable by trauma, but all students. As Susan once remarked: trauma informed teaching is just good teaching. I learned about Susan Cole because of her work as pioneer in the trauma sensitive schools movement. While I work in the post-secondary community, when I looked ten years ago for what trauma informed practices looked like in an educational setting, most active practice focused on k-12. So I reached out to Susan at TLPI, and also to Anne Eisner at Mass Advocates for Children. Though it was an outreach with no connections from an unknown voice at a community college, Susan and Anne responded generously, sharing time, insights, connections. When our college held a 2012 conference on trauma and learning in post-secondary education, Susan/Anne/Joel/ and their colleague Ray Wolpow generously shared a day with our community. Susan's leadership urged collective recognition and responsibility for what happens to children that adversely impacts learning and the whole child, but even more, she mobilized the belief that one caring person and even more so an informed caring community could also function in transformative ways, engaging with that child together to make a lifelong difference. It grieves me that we've lost her, and at the same time I wish to express to her community of family and friends the enormous gratitude we feel for the changes she made, the movement of which she was a pioneer, and the frank, intelligent, compassionate, and generous example she set.

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Angry grandma

5/17/21 - 8:44AM



May her memory be a blessing. She must have been an amazing woman to know.

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5/17/21 - 8:02AM

I was one traumatized child, and didn't get the help until I was in my 50's. I am glad Ms. Cole brought up the issue to help other kids. I hope other people will carry on her work.

[Like \(7\)](#)[Dislike \(0\)](#)[Reply](#)[Report](#)[Ignore](#)**Green Street**

5/17/21 - 7:33AM

The fact that Susan Cole dedicated her life to making it better is both wonderful and remarkable. I'm grateful for the energy and good will that she poured into protecting and supporting children. She was in her Element and made a difference in the things that she cared about. The world needs more people like her!

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5/17/21 - 5:58AM

We should all be that good. She was taken too soon.

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5/16/21 - 9:58PM

What a wonderful obituary. Here is some information about how to support the Trauma & Learning Policy Initiative:

Donations in Susan’s memory may be made to Steven Oliveira, Dean for Development & Alumni Relations, Harvard Law School, 1563 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, MA 02138. On the memo line please note, “Susan Cole/Trauma & Learning Policy Initiative.” Donations can also be made online at hls.harvard.edu/give Under “Select a Fund” choose “Other” and please type in, “In Memory of Susan Cole/Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative.”

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curious10

5/16/21 - 6:03PM

Thanks so much for this inspirational article. The work that Ms. Cole did will hopefully last through many generations of the students she taught.

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