



James "Jim" Cermak Jr.

October 26, 1941 - September 28, 2025

James "Jim" Cermak Jr., 83, passed away unexpectedly at his home in Butternut, Wisconsin, on September 28, 2025, shortly after what would have been his 56th wedding anniversary to his beloved wife, Helen, who passed away in 2009. Jim was a man of many stories, deep loyalty, and lasting impact. A Navy veteran, a lifelong educator, a theatre director, a husband, father, and friend— he lived his life with enthusiasm, humor, and a deep care for others.

Raised in Cicero, Illinois, Jim spent childhood summers at the Machovec family farm in Butternut, a place he cherished and a town he later called home in retirement. Jim earned a BS in Theatre and Speech Education from Southwest Missouri State University and a MA in Theatre Technology at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He later pursued post graduate work at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. His passion for education and theatre would be a throughline in his life.

Jim met Helen Andersen in college in Missouri where they worked in the theatre program, before parting ways while Jim completed two years of active duty aboard the USS LaSalle (LPD-3) with the United States Navy Reserve. After returning from service, Jim and Helen started their relationship and before long knew their love was forever. Jim and Helen married in 1969 in Kansas City and shared a lifelong partnership in both life and theatre.

Together, they performed in many venues across the Midwest and completed a series of USO tours, before settling down in Moorhead, Minnesota where

they worked together in the theatre department at Concordia College and raised their two children. Jim was a proud father and loving husband. For more than 40 years, Jim was a dedicated professor and director at Concordia. He directed over 60 productions, led overseas study programs, and mentored generations of students with his warmth, wisdom, and encouragement. For 20 years Jim was the Managing Artistic Director of Gooseberry Park Players, a summer theatre experience for youth, where each year the Jim Cermak Theatre in Your Life Award is given out in his honor. Jim was neverendingly proud of his former students and kept in touch with many. He loved hearing their stories and seeing where they ended up in life. Those close to him often referred to his well-loved expressions and bits of wisdom as The Book of Jim— a reflection of his humor, insight, and the way he made everyday moments meaningful.

After retiring in 2012, Jim returned to Butternut, where he embraced the quiet beauty of the Northwoods. He remained involved in the community, supporting youth programs, local schools, and sports, and was a member of the American Legion Post 272 and the Butternut Historical Society. Jim traveled throughout the region lending his support to youth theatre and speech programs as a judge and consultant. Known for his big personality, storytelling, and thoughtfulness, Jim touched many lives both on and off the stage.

Jim is survived by his daughter Amy Cermak and her partner Ralph Carey of New Jersey; his son Jamie Cermak and his wife Annie Bussiere of Maine; his brother Jerry Cermak and his wife Judy-Ann of Indiana; as well as many cousins, nieces, nephews, former students, and friends. He was preceded in death by his wife Helen, his parents James Sr. and Josephine, and his sister Judy Cermak Bormann. Jim's family was very important to him which was obvious in his many stories and the love he shared openly and proudly. He will be missed immensely.

A celebration of Jim's life will be held at the American Legion in Butternut, WI on Sunday October 12, 2025 at 3:00pm. The gathering begins at 2:00pm with

a brief service at 3pm followed by a reception with light fare at the Legion.
In lieu of flowers, the family requests donations be made to local youth enrichment programs in your area to honor Jim's lifelong commitment to supporting young people and the arts.

Previous Events

Visitation

OCT **12.** 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM (CT)

Butternut American Legion Post
126 South 4th Street
Butternut, WI

Celebration of Life

OCT **12.** 3:00 PM (CT)

Butternut American Legion Post
126 South 4th Street
Butternut, WI

Tribute Wall

SN

“ Amy and Jamie & families- your father was a such a kind soul whose eyes lit up the world. He was such a delightful and inspiring man who was so proud of you. Jim's joy was infectious and I was witness to that when he left the USA with his May Seminar students! A big man with a big heart.

Suzanne Nelson - October 31, 2025 at 10:32 AM

MH

“ Jim was my across the hall office buddy at Concordia. I love his creativity and humor. We also worked on the creative team for the National Lutheran Youth Gathering. What a genius. God must have needed a director.

Merrie Sue Holtan - October 02, 2025 at 11:58 AM

JM

“ Jim was my teacher, my mentor, my colleague and my beloved friend for fifty years. There's too much to say, too much sorrow to try and be eloquent, too many details that would be left unpacked because the suitcase is just too small for everything essential to fit inside. George Bailey, stuck in a tiny town way outside the bright big city lights and home to more than a few misers and malcontents still managed to make himself indispensable in every way that mattered to so many and with such kindness and selflessness and we don't need a bumbling angel to come down and tell us that Jim was our George Bailey. "One man's life touches so many others" Jim was also our Jupiter, the bright companion especially visible on our darkest nights, mistaken for a star by some but so much closer and more powerful than a flashy but distant speck of hot gas: he was the gravity giant, sweeping clear a safe space for his fellow wanderers, holding so many in his own orbit, and for those like me providing the gravity boost to shoot us explorers, pioneers and voyagers on journeys we otherwise lacked the velocity to achieve all alone. The sky will never be the same.

James Michael Miller - October 02, 2025 at 11:05 AM

RK

“ Jim and Helen, together with the Concordia theatre-staff gave me the confidence and skills to work in theatre, and to this day I am profoundly grateful for their support. My deepest condolences to the family.

Runa Våge Krukhaug - October 02, 2025 at 03:02 AM

 Sean
Dillon

“ Jim was a pivotal figure in my young life, and I'm kicking myself that I didn't get to tell him so. What a giant. I wouldn't be who I am today without him, and I hope those closest to him know his reach was enormous.

Sean Dillon - October 02, 2025 at 01:37 AM

JA

“ 23 files added to the album Jim



Jamie - October 01, 2025 at 07:27 PM