Grand County, Colorado, and the American West lost an important voice and passionate advocate on Memorial Day, 2021, with the passing of Kremmling local and former Grand County Manager Lurline Underbrink-Curran.

“Tough” is the first word mentioned by family, friends, classmates, and colleagues when they recall Underbrink-Curran. And indeed, she fought until the very end for what she believed in, for the people whom she loved, and for the life that she treasured.

“‘Roundly blessed and cursed,’” according to long-time friend and colleague Anthony

“Jack” DiCola. “When they built Lurline, they broke the mold.”

Underbrink-Curran was a West Grand graduate whose family settled in Kremmling when she was a young child in 1955. She would grow up in the West Grand school system and eventually go on to study at Regis University, a stalwart of Colorado’s private higher education. There, she would receive a bachelor’s degree in religious studies with concentrations in business administration and organizational development. In 2005, Regis would award her a master’s degree in psychology.

But Underbrink-Curran was always dedicated to the place she called home, and her career was centered in Kremmling, where she once managed the local bowling alley, and in Grand County, for whom she went to work as a secretary in 1982.

Underbrink-Curran’s leadership skills would soon manifest, and she would quickly transition into a planning technician and then planning director position, a role she would hold for nearly 17 years before being appointed as Grand County manager in 1999.

“Lurline was a force to be reckoned with,” summarized DiCola, who served as Grand County Attorney alongside Underbrink-Curran for many years. “As the county planner and later as county manager, she was dedicated to the proposition that the growth of the County was a good thing as long as our environment was sustained. Her negotiations and the agreements she brokered with east slope water users will benefit us for years to come.

“Lurline typified the ‘can do’ work ethic of West Grand County, where her roots [were based]. She loved and was suitably proud of her children, Kelly and Casey, and her grandchildren.”

Underbrink-Curran served as County Manager for a decade and a half.

“She always rode for the brand,” states former County Commissioner Gary Bumgarner of her dedication to Grand County. “Lurline made being a commissioner a pleasure. She smoothly executed all decisions, in spite of any differences of opinion. And staff never had a disparaging thing to say about her.”

Underbrink-Curran would oversee the achievement of such infrastructure improvements as the construction of the Grand County Courthouse and remodel of the County Administrative Building; such resource development as the Grand County Headwaters Trail Master Plan, the Wolford Mountain Reservoir Project, and the Grand County Strategic Growth Plan; and such ground-breaking initiatives as the Colorado River Cooperative Agreement, the Windy Gap firming

project, the Fraser River Learning by Doing program, and the Recreational In-Channel Diversion (RICD) project on the upper Colorado River.

It may be that some common themes present themselves in many of these projects: one, Grand County and, two, water rights and water conservation.
“[Lurline] loved Grand County, and I doubt there was a day that she didn’t volunteer to help someone,” explains classmate and friend Sheila Jones. “But she really loved her family, really making the most of their time, perhaps because of her battle with cancer. And she was absolutely passionate about water. It is the only word for it–she was passionate about water and protecting water.”

And indeed, Underbrink-Curran was known and respected across the state and across the West for her defense of Grand County’s waters.

“Anyone in the water community knows Lurline. She was one tough lady–a classy lady–but not easy to negotiate with,” recalls Brian Werner, spokesperson for Northern Water, a long-time partner in Grand County’s water challenges and sought solutions. “She stood her ground for water users and the citizens of Grand County, but always came out the other side having made progress and having increased understanding and respect between collaborators.”

“I cannot emphasize enough the great respect that I had for Lurline. She was tough–but always fair and honest,” echoed Eric Wilkinson, retired general manager of Northern Water and board member to the Colorado Water Congress. “There could not be a better representative for Grand County water than Lurline. She fought for what she thought was right until the last signature.

“She set the bar high and not only held others to it but exceeded it herself every time. And she always showed up as not just a negotiator but as a friend.”

And much of this was accomplished while Ms. Underbrink-Curran was fighting her first bout of breast cancer, a diagnosis received during a screening at the Kremmling Memorial Hospital in 2008.

In October of 2020, quietly admitting to her third bout with cancer, Underbrink-Curran noted how she would travel hundreds of miles in a given week while still working as county manager, driving to the front range for what she deemed to be critical water negotiations and then on to her cancer treatments before returning home to Kremmling.

“It’s quite overwhelming when you first find out. Most likely, you didn’t know that you had it when they discovered it. It’s not usually something that you can feel or see or anything,” she shared in a generous effort to encourage others to seek regular screening and any and all treatments.

But Underbrink-Curran would continue to work for Grand County interests even in retirement and amidst her recurring cancer. She continued to work with Northern Water and the Colorado River Water District. And she continued to sound her voice, a voice for Grand County, as in a 2018 letter to Boulder’s Daily Camera, where she continued pushing for approval of the Moffat-Gross Expansion project.

“Lurline was an outstanding citizen, mentor, and friend, and she will be missed,” says Ed Moyer, current Grand County Manager who served as assistant to Lurline for many years. “Lurline loved Grand County and her accomplishments are countless. Over her 33-year career as our Planning Director and especially as County Manager, she always fought hard for our citizens to benefit Grand County and our generations to come.–(She’s probably cussing me right now for writing this.)”

Underbrink-Curran would be recognized for her visionary leadership in water conservation with the 2017 David Getches Flowing Water Award from the Colorado Water Trust. And she would be acknowledged for her general stewardship and championship of Grand County with such awards as the 2010 Michael Muftic Service-Above-Self award from the Winter Park-Fraser Valley Rotary Club and the 2019 Citizen-of-the-Year award from the Middle Park Fair and Rodeo.

Lurline Underbrink-Curran spent a lifetime contributing to fair and rodeo, local education, and health concerns. She served on boards for the West Grand School District, Grand County Rural Health Network, and Kremmling Sanitation District. And she always wanted to find the balance between preserving Grand County heritage and finding the way to move into the future.

“My mom loved Grand County and the people in it,” shared Kelly Friesen, Underbrink-Curran’s daughter. “She loved the rivers and streams and really just worked to try to ensure that Grand County’s water would be protected for generations.”

“Lurline truly, truly left footprints in Grand County,” concluded Jones. “She was a warrior, a strong woman, and a great seamstress. And there will always be a footprint here because of who she was and all that she gave.”