Mary Jane Beech, an anthropologist, sociologist and women's studies expert, died Aug. 6 attended to by her sister, Sarah, and the staff of Rainbow Hospice. She was 68.

Born Aug. 24, 1940, in Ames, Iowa, to Alice Mae (Cole) Higdon and R. Archie Higdon, Mary Jane Beech traveled frequently during her early years, accompanying her father to different military postings. She was married from 1961 to 1981 to Robert Paul Beech, and had two children, Robert David Beech and Richard Alan Beech.

Her doctoral work took place at Michigan State University and the American Institute for Indian Studies in Calcutta, India. She received her Ph.D. from Michigan State in 1972 in sociology and anthropology.

Beech taught sociology, anthropology and women's studies at several local colleges, including George Williams College, College of DuPage, Columbia College and Aurora University.

Beech was a tireless advocate for women's equality and was active in several organizations in Oak Park, including the League of Women Voters, several book clubs at the Oak Park Public Library and the Oak Park Area Lesbian and Gay Association.

Mary Jane Beech is survived by her sister, Sarah (Gaylon) Peyton; her sons, Robert David (Anne) Beech and Richard Alan (Sue) Beech; her nieces, Sandy Mullins and Ana Nesbitt; her nephews, Mike Peyton and Matt Newton Morales; her former husband, Robert (Jean Margret) Beech; and her grandchildren, James, Abigail, Caroline, Conrad, and Rachael. She was predeceased by an infant sister, Joanne Higdon, and by her sister, Martha Newton.

An open house in celebration of Mary Jane Beech's life was held Saturday, Aug. 16, at the Oak Park Conservatory, 615 Garfield. In lieu of flowers, memorial donations to the anti-poverty organization Heifer International (www.heifer.org) or a charity of the donor's choice are appreciated.