

BISBEE — The community awoke to some sad news Monday, as word of the passing of Bisbee's "Hugging Mayor," LaVerne Williams, spread around town and around the state.

She became ill last week with what she thought was just a cold. She called the Community Church of Warren and told them she did not want to come to church and spread the cold, nor did she want anyone coming to her home for the same reason, said Pastor Jim Cleveland.

"She was concerned about everybody," he said. "She'd had colds in the past, and always bounced back."

This time was different. A neighbor checked on her Thursday, and her health had declined enough to have her hospitalized, first at the Copper Queen Community Hospital and then Tucson Medical Center, Cleveland explained.

"God gave her and her family a last-minute gift," he shared. "For about five hours Saturday, she was lucid and enjoyed her family, and grandkids and great-grandkids.

"It was wonderful."

Then she tired, and was moved to hospice care Sunday, Cleveland affirmed. She died early Monday morning.

It was not long before many who knew her began sharing their memories of Bisbee's first woman mayor.

"LaVerne was our treasurer for many years. She never hesitated to share a piece of Bisbee history with us at each meeting. She was a gem, and our club will miss her dearly," said Sarah Earnest, incoming Kiwanis president.

Becky Orozco, a longtime friend and fan, noted "LaVerne was the heart of Bisbee Business and Professional Women, a group she had belonged to for more than 40 years. Her car license plate was about BPW. She was one of the longest-serving members at the state level and had served at the national level as well. Come Christmas time, LaVerne was the force behind the sale of See's Candy to fund the scholarship we give each year to a young woman from Bisbee. We named that scholarship the LaVerne Williams BPW Scholarship a few years back in recognition of her role in that. Her community service overall was amazing. But BPW was her passion. She single-handedly kept us going when other clubs failed.

"The last time we were together was at our last meeting, where she was planning for our annual Woman of the Year and National Women's Week recognition — which also serves as the kickoff for the candy sales. One of the responses to her passing was, 'She would probably be giving out See's Candy at the pearly gates.' I will miss her so much."

Williams spent most of her 96 years in Bisbee, the hometown she loved, with the people she loved. Born July 20, 1922, in Oklahoma, her family moved to Cochise County's Sulphur Springs

Valley when she was 3 years old. She graduated from Bisbee High School in 1940, and soon after married her sweetheart, Leslie.

They spent 60 years together until Leslie passed on in 2000. She continued keeping house at their little home in Bisbee, and stayed active in the community, bounding from meeting to meeting with enthusiasm.

As a member of the Community Church in Warren, she served as the treasurer until last year, said Sam Sorich, who knew her first as his Sunday School teacher.

“I’ve known her all my life,” he continued. “She would line us kids up and ask us a question about the Bible. If you didn’t know the answer, you were sent to the back of the line. She was a gracious lady, a servant of the Lord. She spent a lot of time involved with community organizations. She could never say ‘no.’ She was that type of person.

“We’re grateful for her service to the church.”

Cleveland offered in admiration, “She loved hugs. No Sunday went by without her giving me a hug. She was always smiling.”

She was active in all things Bisbee, including the Copper Queen Hospital Women’s Auxilliary, and was appointed Bisbee’s official ambassador by the mayor and City Council some years back, a title she truly enjoyed and regularly fulfilled wherever she went.

Known to many as the "Hugging Mayor," you could expect a big hug whenever she came around, said good friend and former City Manager Steve Pauken. “She was also a mayor who thought ahead of her time. She led a celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Bisbee City Charter. She understood before many others what the importance of having the authority of home rule meant to cities and towns.

“Rest easy, LaVerne, you've placed an indelible mark on the history of Arizona.”

Tom Klimek, former public works director, offered, “God's new helper. Thought the world of this wonderful woman and great leader! She will always remain a part of Bisbee's Great Heritage. As Arizona sadly says good-bye, Heaven's Angels welcome you with open arms. You will be greatly missed. God Bless You, LaVerne!”

Mayor David Smith ordered Bisbee’s flags to be lowered to half-staff in Williams’s honor Monday morning.

Cleveland indicated the family would be making plans for a service later this week, but no details were available.