

Shana Alexander, famed for "Point/Counterpoint"

OBITUARY |

BY DENNIS MCLELLAN
Los Angeles Times

Shana Alexander, who broke ground as the first woman staff writer and columnist at Life magazine and gained pop-culture status in the 1970s as the liberal voice on the "Point/Counterpoint" segment of CBS' "60 Minutes," died Thursday. She was 79.

Ms. Alexander died of cancer in an assisted-living facility in Hermosa Beach, Calif., said her sister, Laurel Bentley, of neighboring Manhattan Beach. Ms. Alexander for many years had lived in the Hamptons on Long Island, N.Y.

A 1945 graduate of Vassar College, Ms. Alexander worked as a freelance writer for Junior Bazaar and Mademoiselle magazines and had a stint as entertainment editor at Flair magazine before going to work at Life as a \$65-a-week researcher in 1951.

After becoming Life's first female staff writer, she wrote the magazine's award-winning column "The Feminine Eye" in the 1960s.

In 1969, Ms. Alexander became the first female editor of McCall's, where she was known for restyling the magazine to appeal to women's interests beyond domestic issues. She quit the post in 1971 and later described it as a token job in a sexist environment.

"Here was this magazine selling all these products to women, and it had no women in any level of photography or editing," she told the Chicago Tribune in 1990. "I was a figurehead. So I went around trying to bring them into the modern world."

She was a columnist for Newsweek magazine in 1975 when she was teamed with James J. Kilpatrick, the conservative Washington Star columnist, on the "Point/Counterpoint" segment on CBS' "60 Minutes."

Over the next four years, the duo debated topics of the day and famously



Shana Alexander was a writer and columnist.

traded barbs and phrases such as "Oh, come on, Jack" and "Now see here, Shana."

Ms. Alexander once called the "60 Minutes" segment the news magazine's "modern reincarnation of Punch and Judy."

"She had a good sense of humor, she had a — how to say? — literate tongue, she was funny and she sometimes took understandable offense at some of the things that Kilpatrick used to say on 'Point/Counterpoint,'" "60 Minutes" correspondent Mike Wallace said Thursday. "She was entertaining and obviously bright as could be, and we looked forward to the battle of the brains between her and Kilpatrick."

Don Hewitt, executive producer of "60 Minutes," said, "Shana was one of the people who got '60 Minutes' off the ground, and [Point/Counterpoint] became so popular that 'Saturday Night Live' regularly did a burlesque of it."

Indeed, "Saturday Night Live" mercilessly spoofed Ms. Alexander and Kilpatrick in skits featuring Jane Curtin and Dan Aykroyd.

Ms. Alexander and Kilpatrick alternated picking topics each week. They would write their pieces and get them to the other person, who would then write a rebuttal.

"Shana articulated what was at the time the liberal point of view every bit as well as Jack Kilpatrick articulated the other side," Hewitt said. He said the team allowed the show to "play it down the middle ... so neither side could lay a glove on me."

In a 1979 interview with the Los Angeles Times, Ms. Alexander downplayed her high-profile role on "60 Minutes."

"I don't give a rap about '60 Min-

utes,'" she said. "Before I ever heard about '60 Minutes,' I had been a writer, a columnist for Life magazine and for Newsweek — that was about as high as you could get in column writing. I care about my writing. I'm not a quack-quack TV journalist."

But, she conceded, "Every time I get ready to chuck it, I remind myself that I can accomplish a lot in that little minute and they remember what I say. ... I found out [from appearing on TV] that people really like me. Telephone operators recognize my voice before I give my name and say, 'Sock it to Kilpatrick.'"

Born in New York in 1925, Ms. Alexander was the daughter of Milton Ager, a successful Tin Pan Alley composer whose songs included "Happy Days Are Here Again," "Hard-Hearted Hannah" and "Ain't She Sweet."

Her mother, Cecilia Ager, was a columnist for Variety and a beautiful blond fashion setter who was considered one of the best-dressed women on both coasts. Ms. Alexander and her younger sister, Laurel, grew up in high style in Manhattan, where their parents' friends included famous names such as George Gershwin and the Marx Brothers.

She fell into writing when she took a summer job during college as a copy clerk at the New York tabloid newspaper PM, where her mother worked. Ms. Alexander quickly became a cub reporter, her first assignment an interview with stripper Gypsy Rose Lee.

Ms. Alexander wrote 10 books, including ones on Patty Hearst ("Anyone's Daughter"); Jean Harris, the headmistress who was convicted of murdering Scarsdale diet doctor Herman Tarnower ("Very Much a Lady"); and former Miss America Bess Myerson ("When She Was Bad").

Ms. Alexander was married twice and divorced twice. Her 25-year-old daughter, Kathy Alexander, died in 1987 when she jumped from Ms. Alexander's Park Avenue high-rise.