

A Daughter's Tribute to her MOM...

Wilma Adele Berswick was a woman beloved by many. The condolences, cards, and flowers received by our family were warm, thoughtful, and heartfelt tributes that have been so very appreciated.

My mother has been described consistently by everyone who met her as being warm, kind, generous, and enthusiastic. We joked about her having been blessed with the "Pollyanna" gene. Even in her final days, her caretakers were amazed that she always smiled beautifully and said thank you every time they did anything for her.

Wilma Adele Branson was born in Toronto on November 7th, 1928. She was the oldest child of Thomas and Gladys Madeleine (Madge) Branson and was raised in Toronto with her now deceased younger brother Thomas (Bud) Branson and sister Brenda Geiger (Lewis). She remained close to all of her nieces and nephews and had especially meaningful relationships with our cousins Jody and Mary-Lou.

My mother's father and grandfather were successful builders, however, like many others, they experienced devastating losses during the depression. She recalled that in one day, her father lost four houses he had built across from Casa Loma.

Both sets of her grandparents were actively involved in her and her siblings' lives as they grew up, and Sunday roast beef dinners were a regular event. Grandpa Oxley (her mother's father) was a favourite and my mother often cited him as being the one who taught her the importance of the Golden Rule of "Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you". He also taught her that "If a job is worth doing, it's a job worth doing right". Both phrases were heard often throughout our childhood.

Growing up my mother loved roller skating, her Shirley Temple doll, and reading. Her favourite book was Little Women, because, as she explained it, it was about women.

Eventually my grandfather bought Niagara Grape Distributors and the family ultimately moved to Port Dalhousie, a place she loved throughout her life.

While Mom had wanted to be a nurse, she said that changed when she met my father Nick when she was 18 at a YMCA dance in St. Catharines.

He walked her home that same evening. Along the way, he pointed to a billboard advertising a new housing development and said, "See that house...I'm going to marry you and we're going to live in a house that and have 8 kids"

While that might have made some women turn and run, my father was a handsome Don Ameche lookalike who shared a desire to have the kids she always envisioned as her life's work.

They came up short in having the 8 children envisioned by my father, but it does explain the five children that followed, the eldest being Randy, then myself, Kevin, David (who so very sadly passed in December 2020), and last, but not least Nicki, affectionately referred to as "the caboose".

It's also important to note that my mother was an unofficial, adopted foster mother of sorts to many, including two amazing women who have been long term friends of my sister Nicki – Terry Besworth and Julie Chiba. She also appreciated her sons-in-laws Dan and Vince and daughter-in-laws LeeLee and Eva so maybe my mom had more than five kids after all?

When I asked my mom recently, what had been her happiest achievement she didn't hesitate for a moment, smiled, and said quite simply, "Being a mother".

My sister Nicki will also be happy to hear that when my Mother, when asked about what had been the turning points in her life, she said it was having Nicki, as she was definitely her “bonus”.

Mom’s approach to raising her children was pretty relaxed. As a result, we were more “free range children”, then other kids on the block who might have been a little more bubble-wrapped. Camping holidays were especially fun for us. It still is astounding to me that all of us, including tents, sleeping bags, food, toys and clothes managed to fit into one car.

Both my mother and father believed that busy kids didn’t have time to look for trouble, so we were all very active and involved in a wide variety of recreation activities...hockey, basketball, baseball, track, lacrosse, figure skating, scouts, music, dance lessons and more...I’m not quite sure how she managed to do it all but she was always there for us as our chauffeur and number one fan.

As if that wasn’t enough, Mom was always involved as a volunteer with the related fundraising activities and events that kept many of those non-profit organisations afloat. This commitment to volunteering was consistent throughout her life but growing up it also meant we had a front row seat for learning that while happiness doesn’t always come with money, it is virtually guaranteed when one gives to others and to one’s community.

As we grew older and Mom finally had more time for herself, we saw her blossom and grow more confident. She took Dale Carnegie courses, as well as interior decoration, and then Spanish in preparation for a memorable trip with my Baba and father to visit Ukrainian relatives in Argentina. She also learned to ski cross-country and to crochet. And, instead of mending our clothes and darning our socks, she had more time for sewing, including making an intricate western style shirt for my dad.

Her work as a Welcome Wagon hostess and in sales – Avon, Mary Kay, and Weekender – may not have made her a great deal of money but as she explained, it helped her become more positive and learn to like herself, growing beyond the labels imposed on her in her early years. It’s hard to believe that she never saw herself as anything other than the awkward ugly duckling she had been labelled as a child. She once shared that she fell in love with my father because he found her to be attractive.

My mother’s definition of a “good life” or a “successful life” was doing the best for her children, guiding them to become good citizens. In fact, when my mother was called in by a guidance counsellor to discuss one or more of her children’s underwhelming academic achievements (not naming names here), she was assured that she need not be overly concerned in that as busy active kids, the guidance counsellor felt we would all grow up to become well rounded, good citizens.

Although my mother had always been a glass-of-water-half-full kind of person, my father unfortunately was not. That, in combination with other differing values, resulted in her making the courageous decision to leave my father after forty-seven years of marriage.

On her own for three years after that, she became independent, living in her beloved Port Dalhousie in a little cottage, taking courses, spending time with her grandchildren, taking in music and theatre, and volunteering for a number of organisations including Hospice Niagara and Women’s Place. She continued to learn and grow, particularly in a spiritual way, finding a full and rich new circle of friends, some of whom are here today.

Fully expecting to be on her own for the rest of her life, and quite content with that, she unexpectedly reconnected with Joe, a man she had known for years. She fell in love, they bought a home, and were

together for 12 years until he suddenly passed away. He was good to her, and good for her - kind, thoughtful, respectful, and they genuinely enjoyed one another's company. She and "Papa Joe" as the grandkids referred to him, enjoyed spending time with their wide circle of friends, travelled, and loved spending time with family. The fact that he was nine years younger than her just seemed to be the icing on her cake.

She blossomed during that time period. I remember shopping with her one time - she would have been 80 at the time. She found and tried on a beautiful, mauve wool sweater. With her silver hair and bright eyes she looked adorable. Not quite taking my word for it, she insisted on finding a mirror. When she found one, she gazed intently, adjusted the collar, and sniffed, "It looks like an old lady sweater". The truth is that while she may have been 80 and many would see her as an "old lady", she was spirited and young at heart and remained so until the end.

Inherent within witnessing her finding such happiness after leaving my Father was the lesson that it's never too late to change your life. Sometimes you just let go of the trapeze even if you don't know exactly where you'll land. She landed well.

Her decision to move to Villa de Rose was her own. She was lonely without Joe and knew she needed to be with other people. Plus, she was quite frank in admitting she felt had cooked enough meals over the years.

She made many good friends at the Villa. One resident described her as a truly wonderful best friend with a positive attitude and outlook on life. Her volunteering continued at Villa de Rose where she served as Secretary and Treasurer of the Resident Council and as Reading Buddy helping young children to read. The residents there knew her well, citing her love for lottery tickets, butterscotch candies, crossword puzzles, roses, getting her hair done each week, and the colour purple.

She looked forward to each and every opportunity to visit with family. Her trip several years ago to spend time with Randy and his wife in California was a highlight as was an earlier trip with Randy to London.

The celebration of her 93rd birthday this past November at Marisa and Ben's home was a special delight for her because it gave her such meaningful time with her adorable great grandsons Ethan and Blake. She took great pride in seeing Kevin and Eva embrace their roles as doting grandparents.

All in all, the lessons we've learned from my mother have been extraordinarily valuable but by far the most important is what she's taught us about unconditional love.

Regardless of what has, or will happen in our lives, we always know for sure that my mother loved us and accepted us just as we were. As my son BJ put it, "She was our family's number one fan who praised us for our successes and cheered us when we were down".

The Covid lockdown was a challenging and isolating time for my Mom. Daily phone calls from her friends and family were a lifeline and in hindsight were a blessing in that they allowed for conversations that may not have happened otherwise.

Several questions stood out for me. One was her answer to a question about whether or not she had any regrets. It appeared she must not have had a lot of them because it took her a while to answer. When she did reply, she said, "Well, I always wanted to take tap dancing". Imagine that being one's only regret. For sure, a sign of a life well lived.

Another question I asked was this, "If you had the power to solve one and only one problem in the world, what would it be and why? She answered with wise words, "Teach people to be good to themselves and to one another".

I also asked, "What would you like your children and grandchildren to remember about you?" Her answer? "Know that she cared for you...."

Written & Contributed by her Daughter, Brenda Herchmer