

Thanks to everyone for being here, Hopewell church meant a lot to mom and we're grateful for this opportunity to say our final farewells to Martha, 'mom', as a community of her friends and family.

Mom was born on Oct. 20th, 1927 and grew up in South Ozone Park, Queens, NY with her parents Erich and Martha Wilkens, who had separately arrived in NYC from Germany a few years earlier. During the Great Depression, Erich supported the family by working as a housepainter, carpenter and junk dealer, and Martha as a seamstress, from which mom no doubt got her lifelong love of sewing. As a young woman during and after WWII mom worked as a book-keeper, a vocation she also greatly enjoyed. She met our dad, Armand Gabriel Charest, at the dances she went to with her friends; dad was a great dancer, mom said, and so in 1955 they got married. They had their 1st child, my brother Ron, in 1956, followed in due time by their only daughter, Melinda, then Howard and finally myself in 1966.

In 1972 our family moved up here to our house on Ski Run Rd.; mom's godparents Willy and Anna had built the house on the 100 year old foundations of an old farm house that had burnt down. Willy had died in the late 50s from a car accident and the upstairs was never quite finished. Anna continued living there by herself; the area was straight rural back then, I remember coming up for visits in the very early 70s and hearing bobcats occasionally screaming at night across the road. Our Tante Anna developed cancer and finally around 1971 mom persuaded her to come live with us in Farmingdale Long Island, and she died while in mom's care.

Our dad then decided we should move into the house although mom did not really want to—she and her own mother had cried heartbroken when our parents moved from South Ozone Park only out to Farmingdale, and mom loved living close to her

old friends on 'the Island', and the familiarity of the place. But dad had already taken a new job in Newburgh, so the die was cast.

It did, however, create complications within our family and around 1974 our parents divorced, shortly after Ron and Melinda had both left home. Mom got a book-keeping job at JC Penney in the old Orange Plaza Mall in Middletown that she kept until she retired. Dad remarried around 1976 and eventually moved to Torrance, CA, near LA. Ron and Melinda both came to CA for various reasons, and when Howard graduated from Pine Bush high school in 1980 he, too, moved to LA. I followed suit after high school as well, in 1985.

Mom then began renting out our old bedrooms to a succession of tenants. Despite her reluctance to move to the area mom held on to the house and property with great tenacity; for 10 years my siblings tried to get her to sell it and move somewhere closer to one of them, but to no avail. In 2014, though, she finally admitted she could no longer practically live there on her own and so, with Ron and Melinda's help she sold the house and moved to Melinda's place in Tennessee. Melinda, her husband Laszlo and the various grandchildren there took care of mom as she struggled with dementia until she passed on in her sleep this last March 1st.

In the wake of her passing I read the many tributes to her memory on the fb posts of my nieces and nephews, my siblings, and some of their spouses, all of them lovely remembrances of the mom or grandmother, Omie as the kids called her. Something that especially struck me while reading them was the variety of ways they all remembered her and the different qualities that had impressed them most about her: her independence, her resourcefulness, her baking and cooking skills, her sense of humor. Each of them had their own personal version of her and their own unique sort of relationship with her.

This made me reflect more on my own relationship with her and the things that I remembered most vividly about her, my own version of ‘mom’. Our relationship was a bit unique in that, even though after our parents’ divorce my dad remained a reliable presence in my life, I mostly grew up with mom playing the role of a single mother. I found there were some things that I hadn’t seen my relatives really mention but that were qualities of mom’s that had tremendously influenced me and become central parts of my own values and identity. Because mom and I had, for a long time, a very difficult relationship but had both worked hard to make it better, I wanted to compose this eulogy to her to honor her gifts and her legacy to me, as a way to say a last ‘thanks mom’ to her.

I don’t have a lot of clear memories of our family when we were all still together. I do recall that one of my greatest joys was bringing mom bouquets of wildflowers I gathered from the woods and meadows around our house. I picked plenty of marigolds, daisies, Queen Anne’s lace and black-eyed Susans, and would even brave the stings of angry wasps and yellow jackets to pluck a bright red flower I’d never seen before, an adventure that mom came running down the driveway to rescue me from when she heard me screaming. She loved flowers, as I knew from the care she gave to her flower gardens in front of the house, and she taught me the names of all the ones I picked for her.

After Howard left home though, when I was 12, it seemed to me that things grew very much darker and I felt scared at times at the thought of being the only one left with her, without the comforting ‘buffer zone’ so to speak of any of siblings. I wasn’t able to recognize at the time how difficult it must’ve been for her to come to terms with being a single mother. Her dream and vision for her life had been a simple one and, for someone of her generation, one she had every reason to expect would be hers:

she wanted have a good husband and be happily married ‘till death do we part’, to have 4 children and a nice house to raise them in, to have them live nearby and help take care of her in her old age, and to be able to enjoy her grandchildren.

As it turned out, she did wind up having most of that, just not quite the way she expected it to happen, but back then it must’ve seemed to her that she’d lost almost all of it. She was divorced, at a time when divorce was still not common, and one by one her children had slipped away to CA leaving her alone in a large, empty house a 2 or more hours’ drive away from her old friends on ‘the Island’. I know she felt angry, frustrated, confused and sad, even depressed, about all this; for my part I had my own set of problems from our family’s breakup and at school, and it was hard for either of us, I think, to really be there for the other. I felt like she took out a lot of her frustrations on me and I felt a lot of anger and resentment towards her.

It wasn’t until about my mid/late 20s that I learned to see her with more compassion, that she was really not quite the angelic being of my childhood nor the confusing monster of my teen years but simply a woman, my mother, struggling to deal with the loss of her dreams and trying to keep up with a world that had changed drastically and in some strange ways every day from the world she grew up in, and that she tried to memorialize with her ever-growing library of photo albums she filled with fading sepia-toned pictures.

But, as the saying goes, nevertheless, she persisted. Mom always had a certain strength of will that showed itself in a number of ways. On the one hand, she could be infuriatingly stubborn. Our arguments were the unstoppable force meets the immovable object, and she would get so mad at me b/c I was so goldarn stubborn. We fought fiercely often over utterly absurd things, like once when I had to wear slightly damp jeans to school in the middle of February and she was incensed because she

thought I would catch tuberculosis or walking pneumonia from it. So when I got home from school while she was still at work I found she had locked me out of the house. Never being one to put up with such a gross injustice, I fished a ladder from the chicken coop and got in through the window of my room that I jimmied open. Of course, when she came home and found me in the living room she was not impressed with my cleverness. But we did, after that, reach a sort of *détente*; I wouldn't wear wet clothes to school and she wouldn't lock me out of the house anymore as punishment.

When I began living on my own in CA I found that that kind of stubbornness really came in handy for me; if I sensed someone was trying to manipulate or trick me into something I felt wasn't right, I knew how to say no and how to dig my heels in and not give in. I'd learned as well when it was appropriate to act confrontationally to get out of a bad spot, and when not to, and how to set boundaries with others. In retrospect I realized that these were useful skills I gleaned from navigating the stormy waters between mom and I. I had inherited my stubbornness direct from her and thanked her for that many times. She would vehemently deny that she was at all stubborn, and then we would argue about that for a while, but I think that she finally, perhaps just simply fed up with locking horns with me, came to accept that it meant a lot to me to think that.

On the other hand, this same trait was also the source of her tremendous loyalty to her friends and her devotion to her sense of place, of home. Even though moving up here was not what she wanted, she came to devote herself to our house both as a home and as the legacy of her beloved godparents, as if by caring for it and loving it as her own home they could rest easy knowing it was in good hands. She went to some daring lengths to protect it: after Tante Anna died mom took Howard with her on a

real-estate espionage mission into the heart of the former communist East Germany. She smuggled in some highly illegal real estate documents and a bill of sale in a false bottom in her suitcase, under the noses of the Stasi border guards and their police dogs on the train in order to buy the property direct from Tante Anna's family in Leipzig instead of having to go through the East German state, which under communist law was the legal owner.

It was mom's relationships with her friends that I feel was her most valuable gift. She maintained her friendships with the girlfriends she went to dances with as a teenager right up until the days each of them passed away, and ever after made regular trips to visit their graves, to make sure there were fresh flowers placed there and clear away any debris that had collected around the headstones. It was her lifelong friends that became our godparents—our aunts Vicky, Thelma, Joan Karsten and Joan Hayden and their husbands. They, along with her older friend Aunt Marie, her cousins Uncle Howard and Eddy, mom's Aunt Wanda, who were mainstays in our own lives and visits with them were always cherished occasions.

Watching mom's friendships became my own, and I think my siblings as well, models for what true friendship looked like. It just seemed natural for me that, as the blues song goes, 'when you got a good friend, have them stay right by your side.' I feel blessed to have had mom as a model for that and my own friends, some of whom I've now had for 20-30 years, value that in me as well. Even when I have falling-outs with one or the other of them, I, like mom did, will almost always find a way to reconcile with them. It creates mutually reinforcing bonds of loyalty and acceptance between us, and I always make sure to give credit for that to where it's due: to my mother and her sense that friendship is, indeed, golden. So thank you, mom, for that, above all else.

Mom extended this same kind of loyalty to her family, of course. No matter how trying me or my siblings could be, no matter how angry, worried or upset we made her with our misadventures, she never gave up on us, never threatened to disown us or anything like that, never stopped believing in us. Even in her last few months when her dementia entered its final phase, her devotion to us and to her role as our mother remained central in her mind. She never forgot who we were, except for brief passing moments.

In fact, Melinda told me after mom passed away that among the last things mom told her before mom fell asleep was that she was concerned that she couldn't make sure that Howard and I would get up in time for school in the morning, and she was worried the truant officer would come for us, so please could Melinda get us both up in time in the morning. And she was concerned, as she always was, that I wasn't getting enough to eat—mom always used to scold me as a teenager that I needed to eat well: 'eat, eat' she'd say, 'if you don't eat your stomach's going to shrink and they'll have to take you to the hospital and stick tubes up your nose!'—so please could Melinda make sure that I was eating well. Yes, mom, I still eat like a proverbial horse, you really don't have to worry.

But worry she did because, she said, that's what mothers do. Still, I hope now that you've gone to a better clime that you can find the time to relax and be at ease in the knowledge that you taught us well enough to take care of ourselves. I suppose your spirit will always feel concerned for us but it would be nice to know that you're taking some time for yourself now too. Maybe now you can have your flower garden without squirrels and deer messing it up; you can play the songs you loved to play on piano without even needing sheet music—although I would miss hearing the stumbles and false starts that have come to seem to my ears natural parts of the music. I hope that

you feel at peace and free. Have a good final vacation trip, see you soon enough. We love you mom.