

Tribute from Beth Burke

Over the course of the last 2 weeks, we have been flooded with so many kind and moving condolences. The same words or phrases came up over and over again:

“she was a breath of fresh air”

“an inspiration”

“she was like a second mother to me”



But only James and I got to call her “Mom”.

In my mind’s eye I vividly remember Mom’s dressing gown she wore when I was a child. Not just any dressing gown - a Christmas gift from a friend, it was magenta pink with a large shawl collar and Disney princess-style big, puffy sleeves. She wore it in the morning when making us a cooked breakfast morning before school. She did her best to keep these varied and one I remember in particular was Welsh rarebit. Anyone eat Welsh rarebit anymore? Her 2 signature dishes were Bobotie and Malva pudding. I am the only person I know who actively avoids ordering their favourite food - for the simple reason that if it’s not my mom’s Bobotie, I actually can’t deal with the disappointment when it’s not as good. Even at the most fabulous restaurant serving the dish my husband laughs watching my inner conflict, knowing if I order it I’m going to be let down. Now, I don’t actively avoid Malva pudding the way I do Bobotie. I’ll eat it when it’s offered, but my family knows I’m judging it and will ask me if it passes the test of being as good as my mom’s. So far there’s only been one malva pudding that came close. Her Bobotie remains unmatched.

Mom was a woman who prayed on her knees, literally. On her side of the bed, knees on the floor, glasses off, elbows on the mattress, hands clasped together, eyes closed. After years of observing her doing this, our golden labrador Caesar, decided to join her and put his front paws up on the mattress next to her elbows, as if they were both praying together side by side. We were lucky enough to capture a photo once and you might have seen it in the slideshow earlier.

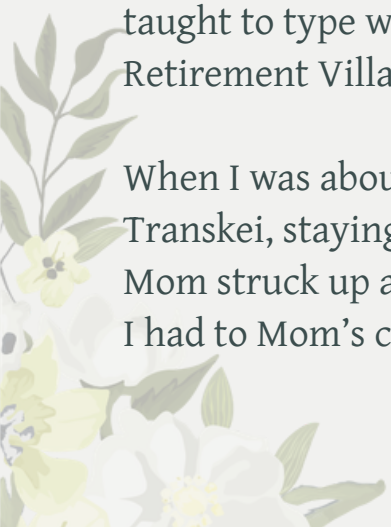


Mom was known to wear her heart on her sleeve, Disney princess or otherwise. Dad recalls the farewell event that was held for my parents when they left Japan in 2010. The home council director's wife Izu-san spoke about how in Japanese society and culture we are taught and encouraged to hide our feelings, but we always knew what Mariana was thinking or feeling. I think that this at this point in the service it could be an opportunity for those of us here to take just take a moment to pause and reflect on times with her that you may have been VERY aware of what Mariana was thinking or feeling.

Earlier this week, I described Mom by saying that she loved out LOUD in capital letters. She also had loudest sneeze I have ever heard in my life. Melodramatically loud. In the interest of time, I'm limiting myself to only one of the anecdotes about her remarkable sneeze. It happened on my parent's very first date: mom sneezed while she was in the bathroom, so violently that she knocked her teeth on the bathroom sink and chipped off half of her front tooth. And so Mom and Dad spent their first date at the dentist - because she sneezed. (Dad returned the favour on their second date when he called her from the hospital to let her know he'd be late because he'd broken his arm playing rugby earlier that afternoon.) Despite these inauspicious beginnings, Mom and Dad got married, and the rest is history. They were together for 56 years and were proud of every anniversary. On daily walks, they still held each other's hand as they strolled around Stormhaven and the neighbourhood.

Mom had a remarkable inability to see any obstacles placed in her path. This made for a novel solution to a challenge she was presented with when she started as the new typing teacher at Strand Secondary School. It was under resourced and had no typewriters. Tricky. Undeterred, she had a typewriter keyboard printed out on paper, laminated one for each desk, and went ahead with teaching her high school pupils to touch type on top of their desks. When the school inspector visited, he commented that he never imagined kids could learn to touch type without typewriters. By sheer coincidence, one of the pupils she taught to type without a typewriter is now the receptionist at Stormhaven Park Retirement Village, the place they have called home for the last 16 years.

When I was about 8, we went on holiday to Port St John's in what was the then-Transkei, staying in a modest rondavel at a beachside resort. While we were there, Mom struck up a friendship with the housekeeper, Ida. This was the first exposure I had to Mom's commitment and dedication to helping those less fortunate.



After our holiday, Mom sent parcels and exchanged letters, postcards and photos with Ida for at least a decade. Any clothes we had outgrown, any household items we no longer used, nothing ever went to waste - if we didn't need something anymore, everything got sent off in big parcels to Ida. She did it in private. I don't think anyone no one knew except for us. Back then there were no email newsletters or WhatsApp group chats to encourage others to assist her, or proudly update people on how Ida's kids were doing in school. She spent her retirement years relentlessly helping others, with the royalties from her 4 books all channelled into her many good causes and they will continue to do so in the future. Shameless plug: Books are available on Amazon in paperback, kindle and audiobook formats.

A favourite food was ice cream. Some of you here may remember Portofino - the Italian gelato ice cream parlour next to the old bioscope. We went there to celebrate just about anything. End of term, end of exams, birthdays - the bigger the reason to celebrate, the bigger the tub we got to have! Everyone in our family enjoyed ice cream, even the dog. When the vet broke the news that it was the end of Caesar's time with us, we brought him home one last time to say goodbye before taking him back for the compassionate act of putting him to sleep. Caesar's last meal? Ice cream. A generation later, when my son Roark was a toddler, it was Mom who took great delight in giving him his first ice cream lolly.

As kids I remember Mom had one swimming style - breast-stroke. She swam lengths of the pool back and forth with her head held up like a tortoise. We asked her why she never put her face in the water, and she said it was so that she didn't get her hair wet, which was set with huge clouds of hairspray in the mornings. At Stormhaven they are fortunate enough to have a large pool for the residents, which I believe is the coldest pool in the Boland. Mom no longer swam, but she still used it regularly for exercise, taking big, long exaggerated strides around the perimeter. If we came to visit and her grandson said he wanted to swim, Mom stopped whatever she was doing immediately, put on her costume and stepped into the icy water without flinching. She never said no. I have a great timelapse video of the two of them making their way around the edge of the pool, mom striding and Roark paddling alongside her, the two of them chatting away, round and round and round. She never got out first.

She could never do enough for her grandchildren. James reminded me of when he relocated to the UK from Indonesia that Mom flew over for a few weeks to help them settle into a new home and culture. What he didn't know is that it wasn't exactly what my mom had in mind. What she REALLY wanted to do was fly from Cape Town to Indonesia, Indonesia to the UK because she knew it would be difficult wrangling 2 toddlers and she wanted to help Astri on the flight.

As a teenager, it's not hard to be embarrassed by your parents, but as a newly arrived 19-year-old in Japan, I was absolutely MORTIFIED the day my mother came home from the supermarket and announced that she had found me a friend. An unsuspecting kiwi minding her own business had been approached and Mom asked her "please will you be my daughter's friend." So embarrassing. And yet, Melinda turned out to be a wonderful friend who I'm still in touch with, 30 years later. Looking back I feel like my time in Japan only started when I met her. Thanks to Mom introducing me to Melinda, Melinda in turn introduced me to Ben, someone who ended up being one of my favourite people in the world. We became close, and he was very fond of my mother. Even though I'm afraid to say his Japanese wasn't very good, he called her Okaa-San - Japanese for mom.

Ben died 6 years ago. So while I say goodbye to Mom here, I imagine her, in her magenta dressing gown, heart on her Disney princess sleeve, going to a place where she can eat ice cream at every meal, where no one will be annoyed if she sneezes loudly, where her knees don't hurt when she prays, where her beloved Caesar scampers around her in circles, and there's someone who can't wait to hug her and say "Okaa-San, welcome home."

