

Remembering Audrey

As a child, I remember Audrey being one of the adults at the church we attended. She was a very active member who helped organize camps, retreats and special events. She was also a friend of my parents. And, when I was 13 and 14, I spent my summers volunteering at the special needs preschool program where Audrey worked as a teacher.

There were 3 different classes and Audrey taught the class that included children who were primarily non-verbal with multiple or severe disabilities. As a young teen, I was impressed by the amount of respect and compassion she showed each of these children. Audrey often utilized special equipment in the classroom to help promote the children's development. But, it was her interaction with the children that always created the most remarkable results. When she sang to Michael, a deaf-blind boy, she held his hands to her face so that he could feel the vibrations. His smile and laughter lit up the classroom and encouraged her to sing louder. Her warmth and energy was felt by all.

Because Audrey was such an incredible role model to me, our friendship was solidified well before she became my boyfriend's mom and then my mother-in-law. But, I will never forget the time I spent observing her devotion to those needy and fragile children.

As my boyfriend's mom, she was a delight. No sooner did I step foot in her house than she would offer tea and home-baked cookies. Mark, my boyfriend at the time, would often head to the t.v. room and see what sports were on. And, I would have a lovely time chatting and laughing with Audrey. She was always so interested in what everyone else had to say and would only interject when she had a particularly humorous story to share. She was an engaging story-teller. And, those who knew her well, could easily recall her favourite ones.

For instance, she loved telling stories about Mark as a child – like how he never uttered a word until he was 2 1/2-years-old; at which time he exclaimed in a full sentence, "You're a good cooker, mom!" She also loved sharing the story about the time she rushed 4-year-old Mark to Sick Kids with a stomach pain. He complained about a stomach pain for several hours until Audrey decided to rush him to the hospital. At the hospital, she said, "Now Mark, tell the doctor where it hurts," to which Mark replied, "Don't hurt no more". She would always be in stitches laughing after she told that one.

Another one of her favourite stories was about taking her 4 young kids to the old O'Keefe Centre in Toronto to see The Messiah. As luck would have it, 6-year-old Mark snuck in a not-so-small bag of gumballs which broke open when his older brother tried to grab them from him. All of the gumballs spilled out dropping noisily one-by-one – plunk, plunk, plunk --down an endless number of stairs in the aisle stopping only at the front of the stage. Audrey would laugh, remembering how mortified she was at the time.

Mark remembers their house being a lot like a Bed-and-Breakfast when he was young. In their modest, 4-bedroom bungalow they hosted an unbelievable number of guests – some came for dinner, some stayed all day, and some stayed for weeks. Mark said that he never knew when he'd be kicked out of his room and forced to sleep in the basement. Their home was open to all and that was just Audrey's way. Her and her husband, Roy, would invite family, friends, friends of friends, and basically anyone who needed a place to stay. Their residence was a main social hub.

As my mother-in-law and grandmother to my kids, Audrey was quite simply the best. I always found it awkward when friends would complain about their in-laws since I had no complaints. I loved spending time with Audrey – shopping, travelling, eating out, attending shows. She loved to organize frequent family events. Full of energy, life and optimism – that was Audrey.

In a world of givers and takers, my friend and mother-in-law was a constant giver. So, even in the end, it was difficult for her to relinquish her role. She was a loving and exceptional human being. The words of an Indian Proverb say, "Tell me a fact and I'll learn. Tell me a truth and I'll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever." Audrey and her stories will live in my heart forever.