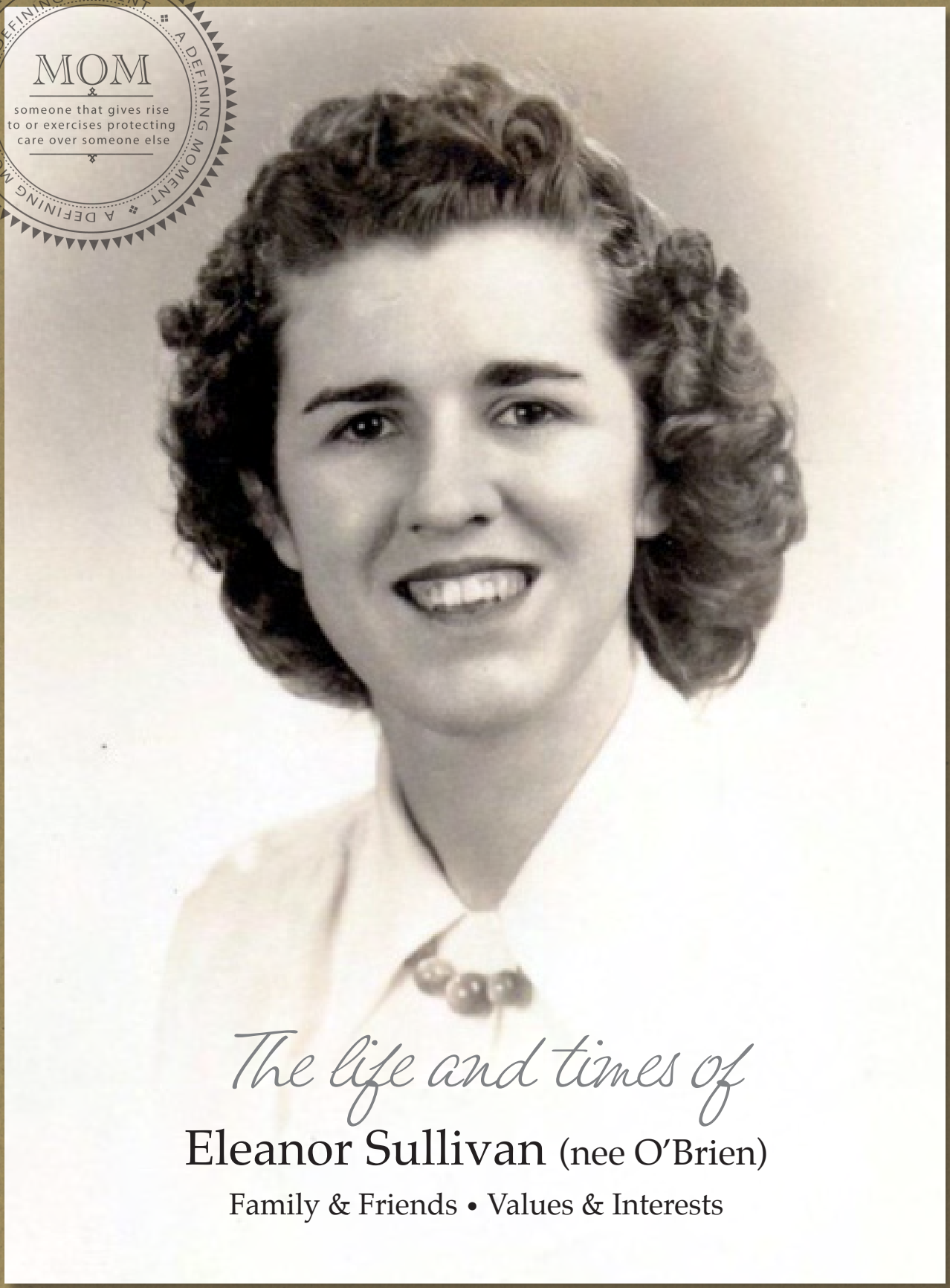
A DEFINING MOMENT

MOM

someone that gives rise to or exercises protecting care over someone else



The life and times of

Eleanor Sullivan (nee O'Brien)

Family & Friends • Values & Interests

A DEFINING MOMENT

LOVE

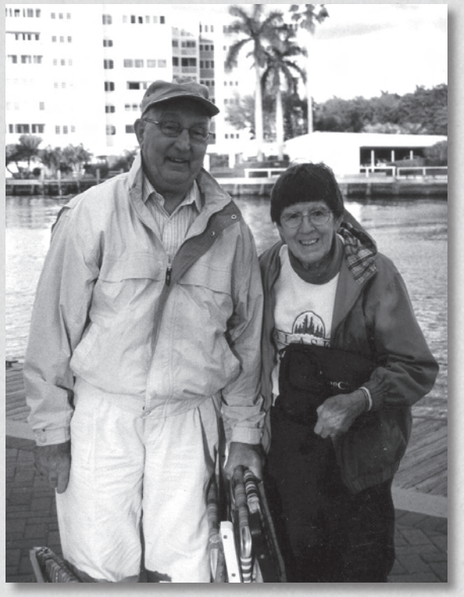
a profoundly tender, passionate affection for another person

remember.

A collection of memories, personal interests and values

Eleanor O'Brien was born on Nov. 30, 1925 in Lansing, Mich., to Elizabeth J. O'Brien and Thomas O'Brien. She was the oldest of three children, a sister to Richard O'Brien (11/26/27 to 11/1/99) and Marilyn Sorros, born Sept. 4, 1930.

Here is a timeline, compiled by Mom's personal historical facts and memories from her children. Aunt Marilyn, Aunt Beatrice, Delores McNacky and Laura Smaltz helped fill in the gaps.



Clockwise, from top left: Eleanor loved to swim. //Eleanor and Bob traveled extensively after retirement. //Eleanor and Bob delighted in family life, with their eight children and 15 grandchildren.

the story

Childhood/Teen years

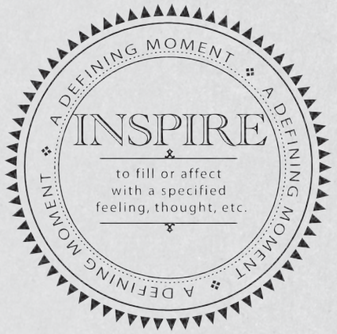
"Our family was always very close," said Aunt Marilyn. "We got along well with all family members. I never did understand how Mom and Dad did it – although we didn't have a lot of money, we never lacked for things we needed. Dad would fix up second-hand bikes for us and we thought they were new! My dad worked at the factory so I know he wasn't making that much money."

Eleanor was always an avid reader and loved history. In high school, she played the trumpet and was in the school band. She was always competitive and a straight "A" student.

During high school, she worked part-time at Lucky's Supermarket – as did Aunt Marilyn and Uncle Dick – and played on the company softball team.

"She was always there for me as a big sister," Aunt Marilyn said. "We went on family vacations. She and Dick were close and had more in common, since he was only two years behind her in school. They knew a lot of the same people."

Eleanor traveled with her beloved aunts – Mary, Carmelitta and Susan – to New England and other parts of the country. Dick and Marilyn would also travel with the aunts, and sometimes they all traveled together, as a big extended family.



Clockwise, from top left: Eleanor (middle) and her brother Dick and sister Marilyn.//Eleanor bonding with her doll – good practice for the mother she would become. //Eleanor's father Thomas sat outside to smoke even before it was required.//Eleanor and Dick often played together in their spacious yard.

foundation

College/Education

Eleanor excelled in education and treasured learning. She earned a college degree in history from the University of Michigan in 1947. She developed many of her deepest lifelong friendships at U of M, including her close friend Delores McNacky, and Jo Jakoby, who nicknamed her "Frenchie." She and her close friends became class officers: Delores was president, Jo was vice president, Susan Slivers and Mom shared the role of secretary and Kathleen McDonald was treasurer.

Mom always looked forward to alumni events and meeting up with her college friends; it brought a sparkle to her eye. Mom first met Dad through Ed McNacky. Ed had asked Delores to go bowling and she mentioned her friend, Frenchie, while Ed was thinking about his friend, Bob. This foursome enjoyed several dates together as each became a couple. There is some family history about Mom and Dad ending their first date by going to evening mass, but that's unconfirmed. However, we do know that the Catholic Church was a central part of their lives, beginning with the years they dated.

Mom and Dad likely crossed paths before they started dating, since Mom was a teaching assistant at the University of Detroit, where Dad went to college. Family friends say Joe Sanders was one of her students. Joe was a good friend of Ed and Bob, and it was common for these three couples: Mom and Dad, Joe and Suzanne, and Ed and Delores to go out together.

As a U of D law student, Dad was studious and quiet. Yet, he was a determined suitor. Mom and Dad were lucky to find each other because they shared the same values and interests, had complementary personalities and were intellectual equals. Dad's quiet nature contrasted to Mom's active interest in everything and everyone. It was a good combination for a relationship that would evolve into a marriage lasting more than 51 years.

Clockwise, from top left: Eleanor as a senior at Lansing High School. // Eleanor and her college chums Susan and Delores at Belle Isle.//Relaxing at their U. of M. dorm: Eleanor, Suzanne and Kathleen.

"I never knew anyone who went to Harvard growing up, but the way that Mom and Dad treasured their respective educations was all I needed to know," said Steven. "Because of Mom's life-long friendships that she forged in school, I will always try to maintain the few friendships that I have from that stage in my life."

Betsey recalled, "I always felt very proud that Mom was so well educated and smart. I actually remember bragging about her when I was in grade school. She continued her education in other ways while an at-home mom. She was extremely well read and knowledgeable on the issues of the day. That's one of the most important lessons Mom exemplified: be a lifelong learner!"

cherish

Marriage

All that can be told is what we, her children, remember. We recall a happy marriage based on love, a solid foundation of Christian values, and a commitment borne of their "til death do us part" vows. Mom and Dad got married Aug. 13, 1953 at St. Anne's Church in Dearborn, Mich. and had their reception at beautiful Lakepoint Country Club (where they would later celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary, and – sadly- where their family and friends would later gather for each of their funeral lunches.)

"I think the strength of their marriage is something I will probably never witness again in my lifetime. I always try to be a good partner/spouse but realize what they accomplished together is truly phenomenal," said Steven.

Special Memories

One of Frank's favorite activities with Mom was to play-fight. "My friends and I would challenge Mom to a play fist fight when we were in sixth - eighth grades since we thought we were such tough young boys. Mom would eagerly accept the challenge and "beat us up" with absolutely no problem. Many times it was two boys against her at the same time. My friends always remembered that!"

Mom was the accountant in the family, among numerous other responsibilities. Money and time were tighter when the first four children were growing up. There were two stages to the household…the really poor years early on, and the semi-poor years when the first four left the nest. When Frank was in college, she would advance his tuition to Michigan State and he would pay her back. "The record of my payments was on an index card and I was so happy when at the end of what seemed like forever, she told me that she was paid in full!," he said.

Celebrations and mealtimes

Aunt Mary, Mom and Grandma O'Brien often cooked holiday meals together. Who said too many cooks spoiled the broth?

Hosting large gatherings for holidays, birthdays and other special events was something that Mom savored. She loved to plan the menu, make the wonderful food and enjoyed talking and listening to her family, friends and guests. Fortunately, all of her children have mastered that art and love to entertain as well.

"Mom was always cooking a meal or so it seemed," said Steven. "Dinnertime was so important to Mom and Dad; I think it's sad that most parents today don't see it that way. My fond memories of that big oak dining table are too vast to list."

We'd eat punctually between 5:30 and 6 p.m., depending on time of year and when Dad got home from work. The menu selection was stable: there was always a main course, vegetable (typically canned or frozen), bread, salad, and dessert with coffee. Food was always passed to the left, and if you didn't get food on the first pass, chances are there would be no seconds. Mom was always generous with allowing us to have friends over for dinner, although she'd often say, "It's going to be slim pickings." Mom scrimped and saved when it came to meals.

Our favorite home cooked meals

Liver and onions

Macaroni and cheese

Fish sticks and cole slaw

Tapioca pudding

Spaghetti with meatballs

Grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup on Halloween

remembering

Christmas

A real tree would be tucked away in the near left corner of the living room as soon as you walked in from the hall. For extra glamour and intrigue about what was under the tree, it would be lit up on Christmas morning. (Otherwise, it was just lit at night.) The classic leaded glass doors to the room would be shut, allowing the lights to twinkle off the beveled glass. It was a childhood fantasy come to life. There was exactly one big gift under the tree for each of us and maybe a few smaller ones; the "special child" of the year would get several gifts. Yet, the gifts sprawled across the living room floor, appearing as a sea of fantasia.

Easter

When living on Bartell St., Mom and Dad had the clever idea to hide our Easter baskets and post clues as to where they were. In addition to candy, we had plastic eggs with coins in them. How we all loved Easter. After getting nearly sick from the candy, we would head over to Grandma's house in Frankfort to have a traditional Easter dinner and meet up with our cousins there.

Vacations

Mom was a world traveler before it was in vogue. While at U of M, she went to Europe – twice!

Mom and Dad went on some exceptional trips with their kids and grandkids. Colleen remembers several family vacations with Mom and Dad. "It was a great way for them to get to know their grandkids," she said.

On their own, Mom and Dad saw much of the United States and often spent several weeks in the winter at the Franklin's condo, always having a fun and relaxing time. The Randalls sometimes joined them and they would also visit friends from earlier days who had moved to Florida. Those were happy, fun-filled times for our parents. They also went to Vancouver, took cruises with their friends, and spent some time as a group at their friends' cottages in Michigan.

The first half of the family included Meghan, Colleen, Lynnette and Morris. // Mom and Dad took 7 of their 8 children to Washington D.C. in July 1978 for a memorable but steamy hot vacation.//Mom and Dad took many cruises with their friends, including the Jamisons and McNackys.

inspiration

Church life

It was a defining time in society when Catholic mothers were nearly as holy as the priests in ensuring their young children received all the sacraments and attended mass every Sunday and Holy Day. Mom was a pillar of the church. She took the time to know each of the priests and was charitable toward them all. Mom and Dad prayed the rosary every night, on their knees, no less. Much of our family life centered around St. Anne's Church.

Personality traits

Educated, energetic and grounded in solid values, Mom inspired not only her children, but also her husband, her relatives, friends and even strangers. People who met my mother were drawn to her gentle manner, grace and acceptance. Perhaps by getting close to her they felt they could absorb some of her joie de vivre.

Mom was always our biggest cheerleader. "The greatest gift Mom gave me," Betsey recalled, "was to have, support and value friendships. It's not an accident that I have such a wide circle of friends. Similarly, I also enjoy chatting with strangers at the grocery store and elsewhere, just as Mom did. Mom is my role model in numerous areas, but especially when it comes to having friends and being a friend.

Favorite pastime

Mom was a good golfer and she and Dad used to go golfing on Wednesday nights at the Rouge golf course. Mom's score was often lower than Dad's, although he was proud of her golfing skills and liked the competition.

Lynn recalls Mom as having a competitive nature, not realizing that she was truly an accomplished golfer. (Her competitiveness often came through when cheering for others – the Tigers, her grandchildren, and even the Lions (gasp!).

Going to Tiger Stadium was a favorite pastime, especially on bat day or other special events when the cost was low. We would pile into the station wagon and she would drive us to the game. On the way home, we talked about the game the whole way.

Mom started golfing as a teen. //Great Grandma O'Brien holds Katlyn, next to mother Lynn and Grandma Eleanor; together, they represent four generations of females from the O'Brien descendants.

Mom loved to listen to the radio for Tigers games, JP McCarthy on WJR, Karl Haas hosting "Adventures in Good Music," WJR and News Radio 950. The radio was always on in the morning and throughout the day.

Mom loved to read: magazines, newspapers and books. Being so well read, she had mastery of current events and loved to talk about politics, sports, authors, etc. Morris remembers their book discussions over the phone, when she was in the nursing home. Up until the end, reading was one activity that she could do and enjoyed doing.

Social life

"I loved how Mom was always impressed by how easily her best friend would throw together a dinner party for 35 people and make it seem effortless. Mom always seemed so comfortable at parties and since she was always so engaged in current events, she always had something to add to the mix. I think that Mom truly loved the 25th anniversary party that the Jamisons hosted for them," Steven noted.

With grandkids

"Mom loved having all her grandkids around," Steven recalled. "She would also get so charged when a new one was on their way to our world."

Retirement

Lynn recalled how unselfish it was of Mom to completely change her life (retire and move), so she could take care of her mother. That could not have been easy for either Mom or Dad. Aunt Beatrice said that at times Grandma thought Mom was her nurse; at other times, she recognized her as her daughter. Grandma lived three full years after our parents moved to Frankfort.

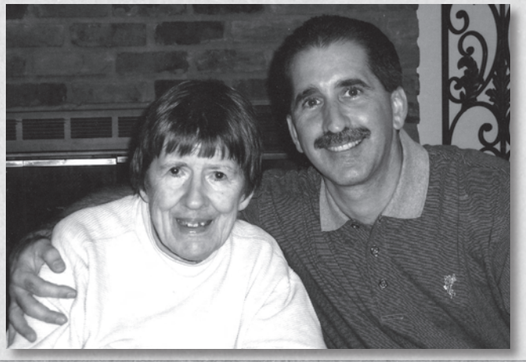
End of Life

Memories of a loved ones final days can be detailed here with grace and dignity, allowing for the peaceful acceptance of a life well lived. We treat this section with special care so that it becomes a touching tribute to your loved one.

Final thoughts

"I know that Mom (and Dad) are with me now in a different, internal dimension," observes Meghan. "Thoughts of Mom arise often, and I realize that her example helps to guide me in my life. The parent-child bond extends beyond the passing of one and survives in the life of the other."

"My parents were my role models and heroes," said Frank. "As I age and see all that is required to raise my own kids the right way, I appreciate the example that Mom and Dad played in shaping my values and beliefs. For me, Mom will always be remembered as someone who was a tireless person who worked hard at everything she did, never once complained about anything, always had a positive attitude, and was a very religious person who truly cared for everyone she came in contact with. As you see in today's society, everyone seems to be consumed about "me" and how things affect "me"; Mom taught the lesson to care about others more than yourself. She was a great lady who made a lasting impact on the lives of those she met."



Children of Eleanor and Bob Sullivan

Meghan Mary, 7/13/54 (Ted, married Jan. 8, 1983)

Colleen Ann, 9/14/55 (William (Bill), married July 7, 1979)

Lynnette Julia, 10/29/56 (Brian, married Sept. 16, 1977; divorced Aug. 4, 1997)

Morris Elmer, 12/18/57 (Mary, married May 19, 1984)

Victor Phillip, 9/12/59 (Kathleen (Kathy), married Oct. 16, 1986)

Elizabeth (Betsey) Ann, 12/23/60 (Robert, married May 30, 1987)

Frank Robert, 10/30/62 (Susan, married May 21, 1988)

Steven Michael, 12/12/63 (Angelina, married Aug. 29, 2008)

cherish