

FROM WINSOME TO WISDOM



GLORIA ANNA LARUSSA

FROM WINSOME TO WISDOM

by

GLORIA ANNA LARUSSA



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gloria Anna Romeo LaRussa begat Mary Kathryn LaRussa, who begat Anna Kathryn Houk. Anna begat the beginning of this memoir process as a high school project. A series of over 30 questions, in an written interview, was the genesis of this life story.

Gloria also begat Monica LaRussa Wooton (and many more...) who sat with Gloria through hours of living, writing and re-writing (and saved and lost Word Documents) to weave together the story as it is now.

Photos were gleaned from far and wide. Family albums, extended and nuclear family produced the images now woven into the narrative. And many contributed to the making of the book.

This document was presented as a surprise present on Gloria's 84th birthday party June 6, 2009 and cd's have been produced to share the GLORIA-OUS results.

—Monica Wooton



GLORIA ANNA ROMEO LARUSSA

100% Italian

My father, Carmen (Charlie) Romeo, was born in San Stefano, Italy. He heard of a land of opportunity and dreamed of a great fortune awaiting him. He was young and adventuresome. He was good-looking, dark complected, and strong, but, slight in stature. He was bold and brave. At the age of twenty-five, alone he boarded a ship to sail to America. It was called the "Europa." This vessel carried 2,516 passengers, 116 first class – 2,400 third class passengers.

The trip across the Atlantic Ocean was long and arduous the third class passengers took the brunt of the harshness of it. After days of trial and tribulation, the "Europa" docked in New York, New York. The passengers were processed through immigration at Ellis Island. The year was 1909. The exhibit of Ellis Island and the passage of hundreds of thousands of emigrants "to the land of the free and the home of the brave" is now commemorated there. My Father's story is one of those.

For my Dad, formal education was not available to him. The English language was a barrier. In America, he landed in Seattle, Washington and he attempted to find his way. It was not easy. I'm told that when I was three years old, he was convicted and jailed twenty-two months for bootlegging and committed to prison at McNeil Island (off of Tacoma). Whenever referring to Dad's prison experience, we allude to it as his "college days."



CARMEN (CHARLIE) ROMEO
CIRCA 1900

After his debt to the federal government was settled, Dad returned to society, where he enrolled as an emigrant into the “school of hard knocks.” Supporting a family was a difficult task. He was employed as a garbage man. He labored for a building contractor. He farmed food for his family. He cleaned and maintained St. Mary’s Church and Elementary School, as a full time janitor. No matter where he toiled, he was a dedicated worker who gave his all. Many of his tasks were back-breaking and

although his body was eventually badly broken, he persevered.

However, this dear man was plagued with demons.

He drank too much and was addicted to punchboards and pin-ball machines. Dad was a “Dr. Jeckel and Mr. Hyde.” Usually he was meek and mild, pleasant and agreeable. When he was “under the influence”, he was angry, irritable, critical and too difficult to tolerate. His addictive personality would have benefited from an AA program. (Hear ye! Hear ye! We are genetically coded).

My mother, Mary Gillio, was the first generation of Italian heritage born in America: Seattle, Washington. Mom’s formal education ended in the eighth grade at Colman Elementary School. Like many girls of her era, Mom married very young. She had four children: myself, my younger brother Carlo, youngest brother Eddie, and a sister who died at birth. Mom’s focus centered on her family, a neat house, children well-groomed and well-fed in a happy surrounding. This gave meaning to her life.

Mom had a heart as big as the world. It was she, who assumed the responsibility for Tommy, her nephew whose mother died in childbirth. Years after Mom’s children were grown; she continued to care for

Tommy until he could care for himself. Both Dad and Mom were happy with their family and pleased with our achievements. Dad and Mom were especially proud when I received my nursing degree, when Carlo joined the war effort and when Ed earned his teaching certificate.

GROWING UP RICH?

My parents were hard workers. Mom was a great cook. She could create a super supper with a minimum amount of ingredients. Her well-planned meals kept the family healthy. Dad was a master gardener without the benefit of formal instruction. He graced the table with prized vegetables that provided us with needed nutrients. No task was too menial in his effort to meet expenses. Our extended family lived in close proximity to one another. We visited frequently; so family reunions were automatic.

We fraternized with our extended family. My Grandpa Vincenzia Gillio was an Italian citizen living in America. He was widowed with three children. My Grandma Anntonette Sautracides came to America just to marry Grandpa Gillio and to raise his children. When Grandpa Gillio died, Grandma Gillio married Grandpa Santone and gave birth to a second family, my aunts: Mae, Theresa, and Edith and Uncle Pep. We spent many hours together. My grandmother’s sister Zi Zi Assenturo also from Italy, had a large family. They too were our neighbors, so we also spent many hours together playing childhood games like street baseball. We all had fun.

Our family gatherings centered on food: spaghetti, pasta and beans, home-made bread, sweet Italian cookies: biscotti and pitzzels.



MARY GILLIO CIRCA 1900



MARY AND CHARLIE, MOM AND DAD, GRANDMA AND PAPPY
CIRCA 1920

We feasted frequently and often. We enjoyed those happy times. Of all my relatives, my Aunt Edith, was special to me. She was born three months before I was. Her mother (my grandmother) and my mother (a very young bride) were pregnant at the same time. My Aunt Edith was born in February. On June 1, 1925 I was born at Providence Hospital in Seattle, Washington.

Since my grandmother was healthier and more hardy than my mother, grandmother nursed both Edith and me. We thrived. Edith has gone to her earthly reward, but not before we had several opportunities to chat about the old days. God Bless Edith, I loved her so.

THE TWO BOYS IN MY LIFE

About my brothers: Carlo was not an enthusiastic learner. He struggled in school and was relieved when he could forget it and join the army. He then carved out a career at Sunny Jim in the production of peanut butter, jams and jellies. Ed was an enthusiastic student. He conquered classes and graduated from Seattle University with a degree in Education. He became a life long teacher and school counselor in a local high school. I love both Carlo and Ed. We enjoy our time together. We often share meals, and always sing Mom's praises as one of the world's best cooks. As kids, we played many games. Our favorites were "Red Rover, Red Rover", "Kick the Can" and "Hide and Seek." We had fun swimming



HORSE RIDE IN EASTERN
WASHINGTON CIRCA 1940

in the summer and sledding in the more snowy Seattle winters of that time. One of my most memorable holidays was a bus trip to a horse ranch in Eastern Washington, with my younger brother, Ed. The scary mountain pass, the unforgiving sun, the fabulous food and the wild horses are indelibly printed in my mind. It was fun.

WE CALLED IT HOME

The house in which I grew up was unpretentious. It had an upstairs and a downstairs. It also had an unfinished basement (more like a root cellar with dirt floor). There were two bedrooms on the second level and a living room, a dinning room, kitchen, pantry and bathroom on the main level. The pantry was unique. It was large enough to house a cooler, an ice box, a sink, cupboards and two small work areas.

The cooler was an enclosed compartment. It had small screens on an outside wall, which allowed cold air to enter and keep the contents of the compartment cool. Blocks of ice were routinely delivered by the iceman to keep perishables fresh. The ice man and his huge blocks of ice were always welcome by happy kids anticipating a cool drink made from ice that had chipped off the large block.

The house was heated with wood and coal. This fuel was delivered twice a year. My brothers and I helped carry the coal to the coal bin and stacked the wood in the basement. It was hard work but we never complained especially during the winter.

Our ironing board was cleverly designed. It hid behind a door that fit into the wall. When the locked door was unlatched, the board dropped to a comfortable height for ironing. Mom liked to iron. It seemed to alleviate her fears and frustrations so she used the collapsible ironing board frequently.

Our water heater was a tall circular tank that sat next to the wood and coal stove in the kitchen. We not only appreciated the hot water; but, also were grateful when we relaxed our bodies and propped them against the heated tank which was acted like an old-fashioned heating pad!

The washing machine agitated loads of wash. They were rinsed and then squeezed through the ringer. The ringer was a great threat to fingers, hands and arms of unsupervised youngsters. Clothes were dried on a line stretched between two poles in the yard. That worked well during the summer; however, rain, snow and sleet created challenges part of the year. Frozen long johns were always a silly sight to see. They looked like huge slabs of dried cod fish. This was always good for a laugh.

GARLIC GULCH

Our home was located in a poorer section of the city. It was known as The Rainer Valley in south Seattle, a mostly Italian neighborhood. Most of our neighbors were too poor to own cars so traffic was not a problem. Streets were our playfields. We played with little interference. Most of the houses were framed by vegetable gardens. The produce from these gardens supplemented many meals and were greatly appreciated when grocery money was scarce. My best friend, Rita had an apple orchard in her backyard so we never suffered from want of fresh fruit, ripe or green, dependent on the taste of the harvesters. Berry bushes graced most of the lots in our neighborhood. We were the proud owners of a loganberry patch. To this day, I value



THE GIRLS IN THE GARLIC GULCH

these berries as a special treat. Because they are so tasty, I appreciate them whenever they are available. Mom bought our house for \$3,200 in the 30's. Today the large lot is the home of a duplex.

OUR WAY OF LIFE

A car was a luxury we could not afford. By using buses, we solved our transportation problems and eliminated the financial burden of being a car owner. On weekdays, every morning and every afternoon, my brothers and I walked several blocks to and from school. My mother remained an avid user of the Seattle bus system for nearly her whole life. She made trips downtown to Woolworth's, to West Seattle to visit her special friend Mary Valenti, to my home as a wife and mother far across town (Magnolia) from where she then lived on the eastside of Seattle with my brother Ed and his family. It was only six months before she died that she enjoyed driving, her first license earned and her only car: a blue Chevy Nova.

My ethnic background influenced me in several ways. My family's dialect embarrassed me. When extended family conversed in Italian, I insisted that they speak English. I was uneasy entertaining friends at home who were unfamiliar with back-yard vegetable gardens extending to side yards and spilling into front yards.

When I asked my Dad, “Why can’t we grow grass in our yard?” He’d wisely reply, “You can’t eat grass.” Surplus food, subsidized by the government certified our social status and financial situation. Mom was a good manager and Dad was a hard worker. We were blessed with the essentials. As a young lady, I didn’t expect exotic vacations, fancy food, fine fashions or luxurious transportation because our friends at that time did not experience exotic travel, fancy food, fine fashions or luxurious transportation.

“Ignorance is bliss” and it is also true, “maturity comes with age.” I can now admit without reservation that I appreciate my heritage and am grateful for Mother and Dad’s persistent endeavors to simplify the family’s struggles. (As a wife of a fun companion, I did eventually visit countries far and wide: Italy, Spain, Ireland, and Portugal. And, we explored the States and Canada, as well. Ski resorts with as many as six kids in tow became favorite haunts).

LOVING TO LEARN

I liked school. I loved learning. I admired my teachers. I was a good student. Reading, writing and arithmetic were anticipated challenges. I was proud to deliver my report cards to my folks. They were pleased



WHEN I WASN'T LOVING TO LEARN . . .

with my academic accomplishments. My mother had an eighth grade education. My father had no formal schooling so they happily relinquished their roles as mentors to “Miz Horan.” My best childhood friend Rita Horan, claimed my Mom as a surrogate mother. They spent hours together. Rita learned “The Art of Home Making.” My mom taught her how to clean, cook, sew, shop, wash and iron clothes. Rita was forever grateful and so was I. While they were busy doing their thing, I was free to pursue academic interests with my surrogate mother, Miz Horan.

Miz Horan also loved learning. Together, we frequented the library, reveled in vicarious travel, indulged in real and imagined tales, practiced story telling, appreciated poetry and enjoyed researching stimulating subjects such as religion, history, cultures and customs. I was inspired. Miz Horan taught me learning was fun. Together, we created a life-long passion for continuing education.

In my formative years, family, church, and school played a major role in my development. My growing up was strongly influenced by the Catholic Church. My Father, (typical of Italian men did not practice the faith, they were the silent Catholics). My mother was the church participant, social in the community of St. Mary’s Church. During my years of grade school at St. Mary’s and Mount Virgin, nuns taught me.

My seventh grade teacher was a dedicated and determined nun. She also was an obsessive grammarian who assured the class that in ten years, we would be grateful for her rigid training. This prediction materialized in less than two years. Thanks to Sister Mary Ambrosine, my expertise in English simplified my Latin lessons and made me the class’ star student. All teachers promulgated honoring God, respecting our neighbors, and recognizing a sense of duty important to the Catholic dogmas. Kindness, goodness, honesty, humility and integrity were also emphasized. We learned about “good will toward men” and “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Needless to say, understanding those ideals is hard; but, living them is harder.

EXPOSURE TO THE PUBLIC

I was exposed to public school education, as well. My freshman and sophomore years were spent at Franklin High School. Instructors were conscientious, though classes seemed less difficult and discipline appeared more relaxed. The distance between home and school was great, I continued to walk to school so I could save bus fare.

At sixteen, I applied for temporary work at Kress' Ten Cent Store. I was hired. My first job was merchandizing. It required a minimum amount of energy and a maximum amount of poise. The task was simple and any simple-minded person could excel in its demonstration. The performance was hysterical. Pointing a straw skyward, the demonstrator blew into it. The blast of air released a miniature parachute attached to a small metal man that sailed through the air and landed on the ground. The parachute man was advertised as an irresistible Christmas stocking stuffer for young and old alike. I earned fifty-cents an hour. I had mixed emotions about this experience. Sometimes it was fun. Sometimes it was silly. Many spectators came to be amused while some came to taunt and tease. I thanked God this was a seasonal job and that the season was short-lived.



PROUD PARENTS OF THEIR
HOMELY DAME

A HOMELY DAME

In my third year of high school, a friend suggested that I transfer to Holy Names Academy. It was a prestigious school that demanded a high tuition fee. Since family funds were limited, my decision to be a student at Holy Names was a challenging one to execute. A plan was devised whereby I was assigned duties in the laundry and housekeeping department of the school, then a boarding school as well as a day school, to defray costs.

There, I earned part of my tuition by ironing blouses for the boarders and by cleaning the school auditorium. It was a simple way to actualize one of my dreams. High school was an exciting experience where classes stimulated, teachers inspired, and friendships were formed. I graduated in 1943. In the fall of that year, I registered at Seattle College (eventually to become Seattle University).

WITHOUT DOLLARS

Even though, cash was scarce, Mom remained a "stay-at-home mom." Her family was her prime concern. She was always at our beck and call. On Sunday and holy days, we walked to and from Church. We found joy whenever and wherever it was available at little or no cost. Picnics in the park provided an inexpensive form of entertainment. The library furnished supervised programs at no cost. The Park Department provided after school activity, vigorous exercise and enthusiastic camaraderie. Lois Healy organized and conducted Park Department activity in our area of the city. Her projects were fun and free.

By distributing notices advertising local businesses, we teenagers earned movie passes. These passes admitted us to the neighborhood theater. It was an exciting way to wile away the hours without spending-money. During the summer, we spent much time swimming. The beach was handy and swim lessons were free. Thanks to the Park Department's aquatic program and to Tom Sedgwick's inspirational instruction, I became a good swimmer. It was fun competing in meets and even more fun winning medals. Even though spending money was scarce, life was exhilarating.

The Great Depression did not cause dramatic changes in my life. Tight finances were always a household reality. Sailing high seas, visiting distant shores or skiing lofty mountain was not part of our immediate future. So, we did not lose time dreaming "The Impossible Dream." We learned to count our blessings and live one day at a time.

WWII AND A WAY

World War II had a dramatic effect on my life. I graduated from high school at Holy Names Academy in 1943. Our family income prohibited

formulating college plans. When I learned I could join a government financed Cadet Nurse's Corp, tuition free, I did not hesitate to submit an application to Providence Nursing School. The Cadet Nurses Corp was organized to entice students into a nursing program. Books, classes, uniforms, room and board were offered "tuition-free" to every one who successfully completed a bona-fide nursing curriculum. A serious shortage of nurses threatened the closure of infirmaries, clinics and hospitals. This was war-time. Nurses were needed to maintain medical facilities and guarantee medical treatment to the sick and suffering.

The Cadet Nurses Corp offered an opportunity to those who wanted to be a nurse but could not finance college certification. I was one of them.

SUDDENLY SICK

I was disqualified from the Cadet Nurse program when I exceeded the time allotted for sick-leave. I was diagnosed with tuberculosis. At that time, treatment required several months of complete bed rest. My family home could not accommodate me with isolated nursing care, so until my admission to Firlands Tuberculosis Sanatorium could be arranged, Sister Zephrein, Directress of Nurses at Providence offered me refuge in an isolated room at the hospital.

Five months elapsed before admission to Firlands was approved. However, this was a blessing in disguise. It was a special time when I believed I was special. My classmates treated me royally. A two way walkie-talkie set, connecting the nurse's home to my isolated hospital room allowed me to be an integral part of student activities. Experiencing "The White Cap Follies" was especially exciting. This student body production was a smashing success that unveiled an abundance of hidden talent. Because of a walkie-talkie set, I was able to join the audience that boisterously applauded my classmate's newly discovered talents. But more important, I applauded those same classmates not only for their talents; but, also for showing me such loving kindness, especially during my confinement. Good-byes were in order.

It was time to move on. When I pondered that our time together would soon end, I silently wept but to my dear friends I sang "Thanks For The Memories."

TUBERCULOSIS SANITARIUM

My new home away from home was Firlands. The setting was beautiful. Stately poplars lined the entrance-way to the administration building. The grounds were dotted with cozy cottages. Beautifully landscaped gardens complemented this park-like setting. The staff was amicable. The food was fair. The nursing care was good. It was a pleasant place to be. College classes were offered. I enrolled in two correspondence courses and received five college credits while being on complete bed rest.

True to form, the only thing that's certain is change. Once again, I was forced to relocate. Firlands was to move to the United States Naval Hospital. The move from Firlands' park-like setting to the stark surroundings of the Naval Hospital was depressing; however, I survived and remained for further treatment for five more months.

The good news was because of my illness, I was eligible for college financing. When I was released from the hospital, I returned to my family home, registered at Seattle University and resumed my nursing education. In 1950, I graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree. I was ready to conquer the world as a Registered Nurse.

NIGHTINGALE

Nursing is a noble profession. It usually pays a living wage. Job availability is always good. It affords great satisfaction. I had high aspirations. I hoped to follow in the steps of Florence Nightingale. My decision to choose nursing as a career was practical. Nurse's working conditions were good, salaries satisfying and job availability remarkable. Nursing also offers a spiritual dimension. There are innumerable opportunities for growth and development. The profession incites such qualities as service, solicitude, sympathetic understanding, dedication, devotion to duty, altruism, care and concern.



SEATTLE UNIVERSITY NURSING GRADUATION, 1950

Nursing requires a rigorous work ethic. Being a good nurse verifies being a good person. As a nurse, one is not only responsible for oneself but also for his/her patients. To be a good nurse, one must be honest. Patience, kindness, empathetic understanding and congeniality are qualities that fashion good nurses. Cheerfulness, vitality, and sound health are added traits essential for modeling good nurses. For the ideal image of a good nurse, sincerity, benevolence and tolerance must be



OUR NIGHTINGALE

considered. Competence and continued education makes a good nurse better. My work ethic demands the fruition of all the above. It's an endless endeavor that takes a life-time to develop.

My friend, Phyllis Anderson, a fellow registered nurse, was employed by a well known Seattle pediatrician named Dr. Rutherford. Phyllis suggested that I interview for an available position in Dr. Rutherford's clinic. I did and I was hired.

SHOCK

A few days after reporting for duty, I felt my world was tottering, I seemed threatened. The crying babies, the anxious mothers and the superlatively skilled medical staff scared me. I was dejected. I felt inadequate. The stress was overpowering. I was fearful. At times, I felt panicky. I was a mess...I needed professional help! So, I conferred with medical doctor. I was examined by a general practitioner named, Dr. Lindhal. He could not find a physical reason for my dilemma, so he referred me to a psychiatrist called Dr. Riley. He diagnosed me as a "depressive" and recommended electroshock therapy. Loss of memory is a side effect of ECT, so details during this period are still sketchy. Recuperation required rest and relaxation.

My family was kind enough to care for me until I regained my equilibrium. During this free time, I studied, worried about and

passed the Registered Nurses State Boards with flying colors. When I regained my strength, I reassessed my goals. I decided to continue to pursue a nursing career. I applied for a RN position and was hired as an Orthopedic Nurse at Swedish Hospital.

Being a good nurse verifies being a good person. My appointment at Swedish Hospital was a step in the right direction. My nursing career was now in process, transportation again was a problem. I did not own a car. I could not afford a car. I did not know how to drive a car. Metro offered the solution (as always), however; coordinating work hours with bus schedules was challenging. However; I persevered in this task and grew in wisdom and patience and then...

..."A MIRACLE HAPPENED!"

One morning, on my day off, Mom asked if I would like to join her and neighbor, Mary LaRussa for a visit and a cup of tea at the



LaRussa's family home.

Having no other plans, I accepted the invitation. Mary joyfully responded to our knock at her front door. She invited us in, seated us in the living room, and acknowledged her ailing son, John. He was truant for good reason. His cold and sore throat were incapacitating. He was home to rest and recuperate.

Mom and Mary had been friends for years but my contact with the LaRussa family was minimal. I recognized John as one of my brother's friends and fellow

agitators. I knew John was younger than I so I didn't pay much attention to him. At this point in time, John seemed genuinely interested in me and my concerns. When he learned I was fumbling work-hours with bus schedules, he wondered if he could come to my aid.

For Mom, this was a green light. She never missed an opportunity to incorporate any concept conducive to family aid. She immediately began to plot and plan. She was pleased to learn, that John owned and operated Far West Cab #16. She was ecstatic realizing he could regulate his own schedule. Since he would pursue fares during the night and early morning hours, Mom wondered if #16 could be in the neighborhood at 6:00 am, and provide me with a ride to Swedish Hospital. John assured us this could be done with no inconvenience. This not only surprised me, but also pleased me.

We made plans to meet the following morning at 6:00 am for my first ride to Swedish Hospital in a green taxi cab. After this arrangement, our afternoon visit progressed. I mentioned the fact that even though I was twenty-five years old, I never learned to drive a car. John was stunned. In order to overcome this omission, he volunteered to teach me to drive. He proposed a trip to the Puyallup Fair. He reasoned the distance between Seattle to Puyallup would provide a perfect thoroughfare for driving instruction. He presumed the distraction of the Fair between going and coming would be a good respite. This transpired according to plan. Not only did the Fair bring respite to a dismal day of driving, it gave John a better insight of me as a person. He was amazed that amid countless temptations to buy things at the Fair, I chose to spend only a measly thirty-five cents for one Fisher Scone.

The day ended happily. John promised more driving instructions and more taxi trips to Swedish Hospital. Our friendship showed promise. He was very attentive and anxious to please. At first, it was a pleasant surprise to discover #16 parked at my doorstep. John was punctual and patient. He also was very reliable. Thanks to him, I was never late. His occasional morning pick-up soon evolved into a routine 6:30 am call. Then, one day as I was ready to leave the hospital, I noticed a Farwest cab at a hospital exit. John was waiting to bring me home.

MY VERY OWN CHAUFFER/CABBIE

From that time on, John and his cab provided transportation to and from work. I was no longer challenged to balance a Metro schedule. I had a Farwest Cab at my disposal and John at my beck and call.

I saw him often enough so that people wondered about our relationship. I stressed the fact that John was like a brother to me. I emphasized our relationship was strictly platonic, however, he certainly was attentive. My wish was his command.

TOUGH ORDER TO FILL

The following was a case in point: John was tall, dark and handsome but I was not impressed. I felt his suave moustache portrayed him as an older man and detracted from his appearance. When he understood this he decided to resolve the dilemma. That evening at home, he removed half of his moustache than paraded around the house. Much to his bewilderment, nobody noticed so he removed the other half of his moustache ate dinner and come to my house for a visit. As he stood on the back porch knocking on the door, I saw him through the window. I threw open the door and ecstatically screamed, “You shaved your moustache!” He was pleased that he pleased me and I was pleased that he was clean shaven so we were pleased to please each other. All was well.

As time went by, we were together more often. We walked. We talked. He wondered about my God. He questioned me about my dreams. He asked, “What attributes do you expect in a husband?” I answered “the man I marry must be Roman Catholic”, he must be a college graduate and he must not be Italian.” This saddened John. He realized that he had struck out. He was a non-practicing Catholic, never attended college and was 100% Italian. This awareness prolonged our platonic relationship, he remained solicitous. He guaranteed me transportation whenever and wherever my scheduled demanded. He regularly wined and dined me. We routinely viewed comedies on TV and often went to movies. It soon became apparent we not only enjoyed “shared activities” but also enjoyed “being together.”

He was curious. He questioned my *raison d’etre*. He examined my faith. He was thirsty for knowledge. He wanted answers. He repeatedly asked, “What is life’s purpose?”

A REALIZATION

As an infant, John was baptized a Catholic. As a kindergartener, he rebelled. On his first day of school, he was threatened by an unfriendly nun. Her weird garments including a bulky veil that framed her face and hid her hair scarred him. He defied his mother and adamantly refused to return to class. This ended his education in a Catholic school and his exposure to Catholic theology. As a teenager, his interest in religion was renewed but short-lived. He was disillusioned by a priest’s unethical behavior. Until we met, he ignored God. After we met, his interest in religion was revived. But, he was not a college graduate and he definitely was Italian!

Suddenly, my marriage criteria seemed a bit silly and I decided this is the man I would marry for “better or worse, till death do us part.” So, our courtship evolved. Our relationship blossomed and bloomed. On June 2, 1951, I took this man to be my lawful wedded husband. In mid-life he was ordained and served as a deacon in the Catholic Church for over 30 years. He then realized my first qualification for a husband: “The man I marry must be a Catholic.” In the process of studying for the diaconate, John earned a Bachelor of Science, a Teachers Diploma, a Master in Christian Ministries and a Doctorate in Theology. He had realized my second qualification for a husband. “The man I marry must be a “college graduate.” And, now I realize my third qualification for a husband: “The man I marry must not be Italian” was not so important. Except, on those many occasions when he acts soooo Italiano! Regardless, with this Italian, I have made my concession.

GETTING TO MARRIED

Several activities preceded this momentous event. John proposed to me at midnight on New Year’s Eve, 1951. True to form, I was indecisive, I was apprehensive. I was scared. “Will you marry me?” he asked.

“No”, I replied. He was saddened; however, he remained solicitous.

He provided me transportation wherever and whenever my schedule demanded. He faithfully accompanied me to Sacred Heart Church for “The Mother of Perpetual Help Novena,” where, unbeknownst to him, I was praying for “Mister Right.” We continued to share meals, go

for long walks and indulge in philosophical talks. He was good company. He was efficient, effective and energetic. I admired him. I enjoyed his company. He was enthusiastic, always intent on furthering his knowledge. He was skilled, successfully solving problems whether they were technical, mechanical or academic. He was entertaining, planning projects that were always fun. Eventually, I realized his greatest gift. He had a fabulous sense of humor! He was funny! He made me laugh! This I especially liked! Was this a sign from Heaven? Could he be “Mister Right?” One evening, in down town Seattle, we went “window shopping.”

There, in the window of an exclusive shop. I stopped to admire a luxurious mink stole. (This was before society stressed environmental awareness). John said.” If you marry me, I’ll buy you that mink stole.” The temptation was great but once again I resisted. We continued to fraternize and experience varied ventures that were vitalizing. As time went by, our romance bloomed and blossomed. Finally, we agreed to ‘pledge our troth to one another. Plans for our upcoming wedding were initiated. On June 2, 1951, at 10 o’clock am, in St Mary’s Church, we were married for “better or worse, till death do us part.”

My wedding dress was a sensation. The simple design was fashioned in net and lace. It was a “Symphony in Grace.” The gown (ballerina length) was stunning. Only the color was amiss. In 1950, tradition

dictated that a white wedding dress proclaimed a bride’s virginity. As a young skier, I decided my wedding gown would be pale blue. I discovered this subtle tint on a mountain top. It was hidden below layers of frozen snow. This hue was so heavenly; I vowed my wedding dress would be the same color. When my wedding day arrived many years later,



THE ENGAGEMENT PARTY

I challenged tradition. I directed Nordstrom’s bridal consultant to dye my white gown, pale blue. I was a beautiful bride adorned in a unique wedding ensemble. Needless to say, I was ecstatic. Our wedding reception followed in the Church Hall. Mom catered the gala affair. It was a rousing success. Inundated with gifts and good wishes, we bade farewell to loved ones. I was stunning in a stylish suit topped with a similar luxurious mink stole as promised. John also dressed in a stylish suit was handsome. We left to family and friends as Mr. and Mrs. John Joseph LaRussa. We honeymooned at Lake Quinault and Lake Crescent.



THE BRIDE AND GROOM

THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGETTING

Our first child was born on March 19, 1952. We greeted her with great enthusiasm (as we did the others). We were pleased that she was the first bead of our living rosary but hardly suspected that the others would follow to complete a full decade. We were able to accept our plight (a household of twelve) more easily by spiritualizing our goals. “With God all things are possible.” We soon realized good parenting demanded confidence, constancy and cooperation. We needed to believe in ourselves, follow our instincts and always work together. We soon realized and internalized the momentous task of babe-bearing and child-rearing. After all, Socrates warned us “Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers” then.

However, I was enthralled with our first-born babe. Her name was Monica Mary. Naming off-spring was a big challenge and very important to me. I decided all of our children would be named after saints, hopeful that the saint for whom he/she was named “would be at his/her side to light, and to guard, to rule and to guide.” In 14 years,



ONLY THE BEGINNING

Theresa Anne, Michael Anthony, John Joseph, Mary Kathryn, Anne Marie, Joan Marie, Mark Joseph, Paul Joseph, Anthony Joseph and Catherine Anne joined Monica Mary to fashion the family of John and Gloria LaRussa.

Our fifth child was our second son. Three daughters and two sons seemed like a perfect score however John Joseph was not healthy. E Coli meningitis caused his death when he was but 10 days old. We were very sad that our time together was so short and

although it was difficult to part with JJ, we believe he will protect us on our earthly journey and welcome us “When the Saints Go Marching In.” In the meantime, our balanced family (three girls and two boys) was no longer balanced. Was that the reason we birthed more children?

It was soon evident that “I was fertile as a turtle.” and since we did not practice birth control, frequent births were inevitable. The family quickly expanded, and it was soon evident that raising children was challenging! Wise Socrates? To learn proper parenting skills, we perused volumes of “How To” books. There were times when our children were good and there were times when they were not so good. There never was a time we’d portray them as Socrates did in 400 BC. Raising ten babies was a challenging chore, however; with assistance from Grandma and Pappy Romeo, Grandma and Pappy LaRussa, generous friends, paid co-workers and cooperative children we were able to jump hurdles and maintain a semblance of sanity.

A MAN WAS A GOOD THING TO HAVE AROUND THE HOUSE! WELL, MY MAN.

John was an excellent husband and an ideal father. He never considered the concepts that many of his Italian friends promoted. That is, there is “women’s work and there is men’s work.” For John, planning menus, shopping for food, cooking meals, washing clothes and changing diapers had no gender. No task was too difficult or too demeaning for him. He was always available when needed. This was possible because he owned his own business and could arrange time off if necessary.

My friend, Patty Small never tires relating this tale. “Once upon a time, Gloria was very ill. So, John assumed full responsibility on the home front. He fed breakfast to many children, packed several lunches, supervised school dress codes, and transported several students to school. He then returned home to a messy kitchen. He wiped up spilled milk, cleaned the table, cleared the dish washer, stacked the dish washer and washed the dirty dishes. About two hours later, John called Patty and asked, “Patty. It is now 10:00 am, I’ve mopped the floors, waxed the floors, cleaned the bathrooms, washed two loads of dirty clothes, folded and returned clean clothes to their assigned closets, made many beds and have a cake baking in the oven. What do you housewives do the rest of the day?”



THE FISHING GENE?

As evident, besides being a willing helper, John was a good humor man. A wise crack, a funny story or a joke tempered many serious situations. His positive approach to life was contagious. He was “a hard act to follow.” And, last but not least, another reason raising ten children was not constant chaos was because we had a house full of good children. They were cooperative congenial and conscientious...that is most of the time. There were bad times and there were good times.

We accepted the sad times and respected the glad times. John and I wear our battle scars well. We survived and the children grew to be fine adults; however, let it be known, I firmly believe “little people little problems, big people big problems.” My Mother taught me that! No matter, big or small, young or old, family is precious. So, I pray every day that life is good to our family and that our family is good to life.

THE RECIPE

Knowing where to get helpful hints when needed is advantageous. Robert Fulghum’s “All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” says it all. “All I really need to know about how and what to do and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. These are the things I learned. Share everything, play fair, don’t hit people, put things back where you found them, clean up your mess, don’t take things that aren’t yours, say you’re sorry when you hurt somebody, wash your hands before you eat, flush, warm cookies and cold milk are good for you, live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some, take a nap every afternoon, when you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together, be aware of wonder. Remember all things die,” including thee and me.

Think of what a better world it would be if each and every one of us internalized these words of wisdom. Every generation has the obligation to preach and teach this “Good News” and even more important “God’s Good News.” Every child must learn “how to know, love and serve God.” “Love your neighbor as yourself” must also be included in every child’s lesson. Mama and Papa Romeo reared their children the best they could. Grandma and Pappy La Russa reared their children the best they could. John and I reared our children the best we could. Hopefully, our contribution will benefit society. And, our children will.

AND THEN, ADD A CUP OF...

I added these ideas to Robert Fulghum’s child rearing suggestions. We emphasized the necessity of a personal relationship with God. We acknowledged an obligation to honor God so as a Roman Catholic family, we attended Mass every Sunday and every Holy Day. We received Communion at the Masses we attended. We believed that by going to Mass and receiving Communion, God would heed our needs and help us be better people. Because God does not make junk, we emphasized the reality that each of us is “very special” and with God’s help, we can be the “best,” An important precept referred to our children was “love our neighbor as our self,” because God said.

We explained life is filled with good times and with bad times. Be glad for the good times and sad for the bad times. Remember, God is with you all of the time...” to light and to guard, to rule and to guide.” Recognize, “What A Friend You Have in Jesus.” His love is limitless. He’s at our beckon call. Just, “Ask and you will receive.”



1964



1989



2009

THE NEST EMPTIES

Now, without children, our house is silent. Crying babies, demanding toddlers, testy teenagers, frisky fellows and lively ladies no longer rock the walls. Stinky shoes, sweaty socks, and smelly sweatshirts no longer conceal closet floors. Greasy paws and sticky fingerprints no longer mar tabletops or mark window panes. Without children, schedules are less demanding. Dinner time is less disruptive. Shopping is less hectic. Cooking is less time consuming. Serving meals is less challenging.



TONY

Kitchen clean-up is less enervating. Without children, the household's noise level is greatly decreased. Our abode is as silent as a sanctuary and the "Sound of Silence" is greatly appreciated... that is sometimes... Being child free has its advantages but "after all is said and done"...I miss yesterday! I miss the highs and lows created by the drama of living with children, (small or tall, skinny or stout.)

The time Tony fell out of the car (before seatbelts) created high anxiety. He was there and then he wasn't there. While turning a corner, the car door flew open. Tony was ejected from the passenger seat to the moving pavement. I visualized a broken body squished under the rear wheels of our GMC van. It didn't happen. Thank God... his Guardian Angel was on duty. Tony will always be a challenge to his ever watchful Guardian Angel but that's what makes him charming! I love you, Tony!

On another occasion, the gamut of emotional responses was evidenced when we discovered a five year-old Anne missing. A thorough search of the neighborhood failed to disclose the whereabouts of our six year old daughter. In desperation, we notified the police. A rapid response didn't happen. Waiting for assurance that she was alive and well was deferred. Seconds seemed like years. Fretful anticipation

evolved into fearful panic. Hours lapsed. Eventually, a patrol car arrived at our door step to return Anne and her six year old "boyfriend" from what I would dub "hell."

An unsupervised stroll took Anne and her friend Scott several blocks from home. They were rescued at the Interbay hump-yard where bulky box cars powered by huge engines were moved from track to track. They survived.

Thank God, their Guardian Angels worked double duty that day. As you can see, Anne's penchant for drama and an acting career was evident at a very early age. With Anne, there's never a dull moment! She's exciting. I love you, Anne!

Theresa was charming and compliant...that is most of the time. When upset, she flaunted her Italian temperament. Her fiery temper was threatening. Everyone avoided her and she avoided everyone. Routinely, she would run away. Not to worry though. We soon learned her haven was Our Lady of Fatima's Convent. When her absence was noticed, we'd confer with the nuns. We were undismayed because we knew she was safe while her Italian temper calmed. "Therese" (as I came to call her) is gifted. Because of her temperament and talents, she successfully produced several Broadway Musicals for the Bellevue School District over a period of twenty two years.



ANNIE



THERESA

Each performance was a smashing success. Audiences were entertained, students were re-enforced and families were pleased. I was very proud. I love you, Therese!

The 70's were challenging times with many young people being independent, bright and sometimes bold. Mary Kaye was independent, bright and on occasion, bold. She also was enthusiastic, energetic, caring, and cooperative; therefore, I was perplexed to learn of "Mary Kaye's Holy Names Experience." During Mary Kaye's junior year, teachers' seemed threatened. They sensed disloyalty. They deplored disrespect. As always, they were concerned about the school's viability and worried about its effectiveness. "The straw that broke the camel's back" was a crude and rude message camouflaged on the cover of the HNA year book. This incident seemed to motivate the nuns into reviewing



MARY KAYE

incoming seniors and thus prevent future fiascos. Mary Kaye was a candidate for the senior class. She and senior friends were directed to write a letter giving reasons why HNA was their school choice. Mary Kaye, a fun loving student wrote about fun, friendship, and traditions. She failed to mention God. She received a response stating since she had no spiritual motivation to attend HNA and the school authorities felt she could be served just as well in a public school. Mary Kaye was a scapegoat. She would not be allowed to graduate with her friends at Holy Names Academy.

She was devastated. Needless to say it took a long time for her to recoup and even a longer time for me to forgive and forget that HNA failed our daughter. Mary Kaye is the joy of our life! She has innumerable gifts singing, shopping, cooking, decorating and writing poetry

are a few. But her greatest talent is her ability to make people laugh! Even when a non-milgnant tumor robbed her of some of her vitality, her great career as a registered nurse at the UW neo-natal ward, all her trademarks remain. Fill the world with happy faces, Mary Kaye! I love you!



MARK

Mark is handsome and exceptionally bright. He has an inquiring mind with varied interests. I was enthused to see him cultivate seedlings on the window sill of his bedroom. "If I knew then what I know now," I wouldn't have been so excited. I was shocked to learn the seedlings were marijuana plants! Mark socializes easily. He likes people and people like him. As a teenager, he assisted at parties for our friends. He often attended bar. He performed well. He pleased everyone, including himself.

He later admitted while mixing cocktails he sipped Scotch and liked its taste. He also acknowledged sampling and savoring other spirits he served. Little did he realize demons in the form of alcohol, drugs, and chronic depression would be fodder for his addictive personality, and our genetic coding. Mark with the help of loved ones recognized that he had serious problems His situation was desperate. He was forced to make a choice. Sobriety or death was his option. He admitted that although this struggle would be a life-time battle, there is hope. "He Shall Overcome." Mark helps me understand "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." Mark is my inspiration! He teaches me how to live "one day at a time." This wisdom helps me to cope. With God's grace and Mark's dogged determination, he will succeed. With Mark as a mentor, I too will succeed! "I love you Mark!"

Monica is bright and beautiful. She attended WSU for higher learning. Jon Wooton was beautiful and bright. He attended WSU for



MONICA . . . THEN AND NOW

greater knowledge. They met each other and liked what they saw. They developed a relationship. They were young. They were unsophisticated. At that point in time, having a baby was not their intent but it happened... and being ethical, they conferred with those they loved. They notified "his folks." They informed "her folks" "His folks" were kinder then "her folks." His folks arranged a nice, small wedding and a reception. "Her folks" ignored the celebration.

I was distraught. I was arrogant and righteous, I was more concerned about "me" then "thee," I wallowed in self-pity. I failed to provide my daughter the support needed at that point in time. If only I could have changed hindsight into foresight,

my response would have been less egocentric and more Christ-orientated. Monica and Jon's parenting skills proved effective. Their family of four children has flourished (despite and because of their special special-needs Emily). Monica's literary contributions are praise-worthy.

As a teen-ager, and editor of her high-school newspaper at Holy Names, she won state-wide recognition. As an adult, she and several talented volunteers agree to update the history of the Magnolia neighborhood. Monica served as project manager for *Magnolia: Memories & Milestones*, developing its format and writing team. Rather than a comprehensive historical chronology, "Memories & Milestones" is a series of essays that run the gamut of childhood memories to major historical changes on the "Bluff." Monica's writing is exceptional.

Her photography is super. "Memories and Milestones" is a masterpiece. The sequel, just published this past November, *Magnolia, Making More Memories* was another co-operative project that she headed up and is another beautiful to look at and fun to read contribution to our neighborhoods sense of place. I am proud of the role Monica played in these productions. Monica, I love you!

As a child, Joan was fair of face. As a mature woman, she is beautiful. As a growing girl, she was compliant, compassionate, patient, kind and empathetic. Her presence was sought. She radiates joy and peace. Her artistic accomplishments were always appreciated. Her performance as "Furumase" in "Fiddler on the Roof" was of Academy Award Caliber. Joan was exemplary. She knew who she was and accepted who she is. When she announced that she was lesbian, I was confused, I did not understand; however, with Joan as a model, I finally and fully recognized the superficiality of my spirituality. Joan is real. She lives the commandment, "Love Your Neighbor as Thy Self." I often mouthed the words but never vitalized the meaning. Joan helped me realize that only by actualizing this ideal, could I be "real." She taught me the true meaning of love. For this, I am most grateful. Joan has innumerable talents. She's a culinary artist, a master gardener and an empathetic caretaker as a registered nurse. She loves antiques and likes junking. She traveled the world on a special assignment nursing a Saudi Prince struck with cancer. I love you!



JOANIE . . . THEN AND NOW



PAUL

Paul was and still is unassuming. He accepted life without demanding too much in return. He never caused trouble. Books and magazines often cluttered his room, so when Sister Superior requested a conference we weren't too worried. Sister was concerned. She thought Paul had a reading disability. We were able to assure

her he did read. However; Paul's interest was focused mainly on mechanical and "How To" books. In the hope of expanding his interest we agreed a tutor might be helpful. This extra attention improved his reading skills. However, he continued to pursue mainly mechanical manuals and "How To Books." That was not disturbing! As a teenager, he rebuilt a BENLA truck and designed and built several go-carts. As an adult, he rebuilds boats, remodels kitchens, and redesigns bathrooms. For Paul, there is no problem that is too much of a problem. If there's a question, Paul finds an answer. His marine expertise is most impressive. He assumes unlimited responsibility. He maintains and skipper's cruisers costing millions of dollars. His work ethic is exemplary.

Good job, Paul! I love you!

Michael was our first born son. A special spot in an Italian mother's heart is found for these sons. His pre-school, grade school, middle school and high school days were trouble free. He was a good boy. He was interested in commercial fishing and because he was a conscientious lad and a super fisherman his fishing career was initiated at a young age. His big opportunity arrived when he was selected as a skipper for an



MIKE

Alaskan fishing vessel in the Bering Sea. All was well until we learned- all was not well. Michael was ill. He returned to Seattle. His dreams disintegrated. As a fisherman, he was forced to postpone his aspirations. There was something wrong! He was disturbed. He seemed out of control. His moods vacillated between highs and lows. His emotions were labile. We were worried. In desperation, we sought medical attention. Michael was examined, diagnosed and successfully treated. His medication was magical. When his condition stabilized, Michael resumed his role as a hale and hardy "Man of the Sea." Whether on land or sea, Michael is a gourmet cook and conscientious steward. Michael's dedication, determination, and diligence have and always will spell success for this hard working man. Divorced and now, oh so happily re-married, he is the happily involved father of a blended family of five teens! God bless! I love you Michael!

Cathy is sometimes referred to as our caboose. She is the perfect example that "last is not least." She has the combined beauty of all her sisters. Her role as youngest, earned her center

stage attention, she was lovingly spoiled by her 9 nine siblings and Mom and Dad!. Cathy is beautiful. Cathy is loved. Cathy is special. Cathy was spoiled. However this did not retard her spiritual growth. Cathy remains loving and lovable. Cathy remains conscientious and caring. She learned at a young age, that it is better to give than to receive. She knows she was made by God for God. She is a single parent with two precious children. Because, she has a personal relationship with Jesus, she is a loving mother, a faithful friend and a conscientious Christian. She values her friendship with Jesus and is confident He will lead her in the "path of righteousness." Go with God, Catherine! I love you a bunch!



CATHY

EMPTY NEST? LIFE GOES ON...

Retirement is a vague concept, at first. In my situation retirement came and went several times. I retired from nurse's training in 1946. I resumed nurse's training in 1948. I worked as a nurse in 1950. I married in 1951. I worked full-time as a home-maker and mother in 1952. I retired as a full-time homemaker and mother in 1983. I worked as a "part-time" home maker, mother and geriatric nurse in 1984. I retired as a geriatric nurse in 1987. I resumed my nursing career caring for the mentally delayed that same year. And in 1999, for the last time, I really retired! I resigned my position at Fircrest School. So we did! At the moment, retirement seemed to be an answer to prayer. We dreamed impossible dreams. We anticipated fun in the sun. We fantasized exciting ventures. We imagined skiing steep slopes. We pictured sailing stormy seas. We proposed picnics in picturesque parks. We traveled countless countries to absorb foreign civilizations, cultures, and customs. And, these dreams did come true.

BACK IN THE GAME, SORT OF...GRAND MUM

Being a grandma for the first time was a spiritual experience. My first born gave birth to her first born on December 7, 1972. I was a great grandmother! It was awesome. As usual, I marveled at the "miracle of birth." I was proud of a job well done. Monica weathered child birth with dignity and approached motherhood with determination. She named my first born grandchild, Jennifer Katurah. Jennifer weighed 9 pounds. Immediately, I could see her beauty and sense her wit. She was a happy baby easily satisfied with breast milk, funny faces and patty-cakes. She loved attention, and I loved giving her what she loved. I liked being her grandmother. I could "ooh" and ah", and when my little angel had had enough of my "oohing" and ahhing," I could happily return her to her parents and be sure she was in safe hands. Jenny is a perfect role model for my other great and grandchildren. For Emily, Jacob, Elisabeth, Christina, Maryce, Domini, Brianna, Corina, Spencer, Nathan, Anna, Walker, Zane, Amanda, Joshua, Peter,



AND YET TO COME . . .

BRIANNA, CORINA, SPENCER, ZANE, JACOB LACY & JULIA

Elyse, Jacob and Julia, I pray they all will learn to live "one day at a time," develop their God-given gifts, appreciate beauty, be happy and "learn to love all people."

I am happy to report that Jennifer is happily married to a good man. His name is Voja. We love him dearly. He is a perfect husband and another fine father. On February 28, 2004, Jenny and Voja introduced their first-born, Isabella Grace Andjelkovic—the world meet Bella—Bella, the world. This made Jenny and Voja proud parents and John and me now grateful great-grandparents. God protect this young family now of 5...Luka and Maia have joined the Connecticut bunch, as well as, our future families, our middle-aged families and our original family: "May we live happily ever after."

WHAT PLACE DOES RELIGION HAVE IN YOUR LIFE TODAY?

To me, religion is an integral part of my existence. It teaches me my obligation to God and my responsibility to humankind. It offers me a formula for exemplary behavior. It is a discipline that guarantees maturity. It helps me to be the best person I can be. It promises me joy and peace. As a Roman Catholic, I frequently meditate, pray, hear Mass and receive the Sacraments with the confidence that I will grow and develop intellectually, emotionally and spiritually.

HOW DID YOUR RELIGION PLAY A PART IN YOUR FAMILY?

Religion played a significant role in our family. Babies were baptized within a month of their birth.

Every Sunday and every Holy Day, we went to mass together. All the children attended Catholic school from grade one to grade twelve. Their required uniforms proclaimed their status as parochial school students for many years. Second graders received First Holy Communion. Eighth graders received the Sacrament of Confirmation. On Fridays, we abstained from meat. In a spirit of self-sacrifice, parents fasted during Lent. Children were encouraged to develop character by denying themselves special treats. With the hope of inspiring my children, I related my youthful experience of self-denial. My best friend, Rita and I usually abstained from candy. We collected our bounty in a special container. On St Patrick's Day, about midway through Lent, the Church granted us a reprieve. Rita and I rewarded ourselves self by gorging much of our hidden stash. We then resumed our fast and collected more candy for the remaining days of Lent. When Lent ended at noon on Holy Saturday, Rita and I would stuff our faces with huge amounts of sugar. This indiscretion usually resulted in a serious stomach-ache and interfered with our Easter Sunday celebration. Unimpressed with this testimonial, my gang refused to emulate our example. However, with some insistence from Dad and me, we would recite the family rosary. With a sizable group such as ours, this prayer experience was not always peaceful and serene. The rosaries we prayed on our return trips from the mountain were more peaceful and serene since many of the exhausted skiers slept soundly. Most families celebrated birthdays but we paid

less attention to birthdays and more attention to feast days. All of my children were named after special saints: St. Monica, St. Theresa the Little Flower, St. Anthony, St. Catherine, St. Joan of Ark, St. Joseph, St. Anne, St. Paul, and St. Mark. The family member, whose name-sake was being honored on his or her feast day, received a special treat. This was a "Popsicle." I encouraged varied practices for spiritual growth and development. When sirens were heard, a Hail Mary was in order. It was a prayer for the needs of the person requiring medical aid. If one passed a Catholic Church, God's presence in the Blessed Sacrament was acknowledged by making the sign of the cross. If an individual was hurting or feeling sad, "offering it up" guaranteed a precious stone would be added to his or her Heavenly Crown.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE HARDEST TIME IN YOUR LIFE?

HOW DID YOU DEAL WITH IT?

The hardest time in my life occurred when I was thirty-three years old. I was expecting our fifth child. The pregnancy was normal, the delivery uncomplicated and the post partum period uneventful. My fifth child was a boy. How perfect! Three sisters and one brother anxiously anticipated the arrival of the latest La Russa. It was a boy! Hooray! Three girls and two boys was an excellent mix for an ideal family. My prayers were answered.

I was ecstatic because now, Michael, our older son had a friend. He had a companion. He had a brother. Together they could safeguard their treasures. Together they could protect their possessions. Together they could fight each other's battles. But best of all, together they could resist female domination. To me, two boys and three girls seemed to be a better ratio. I was a proud mama. I reveled in my glory. Life was good! I was ecstatic. I decided John Joseph would be a perfect name for our second son. John Joseph Senior disagreed. He did not want a junior.

Our friends, George and Eileen Eckoff were the appointed godparents. Their son was killed during World War II. When we realized, we would be paying tribute to the Eckoffs by naming our son after their son, it was agreed that John Joseph was the perfect name. I anticipated

my release from the hospital. When I witnessed JJ's introduction to his sisters and brother, I was delighted. I could hardly wait. Wait I had to though, because Doctor Polley, our pediatrician advised us to leave JJ in the hospital for further testing. Finally, a few days later, JJ was discharged to our family home. I was his happy care-taker. Michael, Monica, Terry and Mary Kaye were still being cared for at Grandma Romeo's and Grandma LaRussa. As yet, they had not meet their new brother.

One afternoon, while I was home alone, tending to JJ's needs, I was alarmed by his difficult breathing and abnormal coloring. With the help of kind neighbors, we rushed JJ to the hospital where we met John and Dr Polley. After a cursory exam, Dr Polley dismissed us with the assurance that "all was well." As we exited the hospital, our name was announced over the loud speaker. We were summoned to the pediatric department to learn John Joseph had died. I was devastated. The dreams I dreamed were dashed. My beautiful boy with black hair and brown eyes was dead. How would I tell Michael? How could I explain to the three sisters that their new brother's earthly stay was canceled? I soon learned that the emotional involvement of the children wasn't as in depth as mine. I explained to Michael that his brother loved us but had to leave us. I emphasized our belief that some day, we would all be happy together in a "Safer Place." His comment was "Ah shucks."

My emotional equilibrium however was seriously rocked. As a young person, I was often introduced to "death and dying." Family members died. Family members cried. I was taught that "death is a mystery!" I was assured that "the best is yet to come." I believed that life after death was "Care Free." There will be "no pain, no sorrow and no suffering." "Joy, love and peace" will reign forever. At one time, these wise words satisfied my head but at the time of JJ's death they failed to touch my heart. My whole being was saddened. My grief was grave. JJ's death was overwhelming. The burden was too heavy. I was on the brink of breaking. It had to stop! I needed to resume my emotional equilibrium. The family needed me. My roles as mother, homemaker, laundry-lady, taxi-driver, shopper, chef and referee beckoned.

With God's help, my head was straightened and my heart was synchronized. When I completely surrendered my will to the

"Will of God" things changed. Life was once again "worth living," My faith was renewed. My hope was revived. I believe there is "one more angel in heaven" who always will have a personal interest in me and mine. His name is John Joseph La Russa. He is forever "at our side to light, and to guard, to rule and to guide."

WHAT WAS YOUR REACTION WHEN YOU HEARD YOU HAD BREAST CANCER?

In 2002, a routine physical exam included a mammogram. Doctor Yuskaitis, my primary physician questioned the reading, so he ordered a repeat mammogram. I was concerned. The technician eased my concern when she assured me, repeat mammograms are often ordered. It was a safety valve, not necessarily a death knoll. I had a second mammogram. It too was questionable.

I was referred to Doctor Dawson, a surgical specialist who was director of the breast cancer clinic. Her reputation is nationally recognized. I met her. I liked her. A needle biopsy was ordered. Results confirmed suspicions. I was a cancer victim. Surgery was indicted. The left breast was definitely affected. The right breast did not seem to be involved. A single or double mastectomy was my choice. A double mastectomy assured better balance, less cosmetic challenges, and minimized the risk of further cancer involvement. I opted for a double mastectomy. With Doctor Dawson's expertise and Nurse Joan's and Nurse Mary Kaye's personal interest, medical knowledge and their kind and loving dispositions, I should have been care-free.

Not so! I was anxious! I was apprehensive! I was scared! My thoughts dwelled on a diagnosis that courted death and invasive treatments that were ugly. Surgery provided a breastless body. Chemotherapy produced hairless heads. Radiation's massive machines accentuated fears fed by claustrophobia. It seemed there were no simple solutions. Ultimately, I was blessed.

I was spared. The choice of a double mastectomy was divinely inspired. The involvement of the right breast was not established until after my mastectomy. Had I had a single mastectomy, a repeat surgical performance would have been necessary. Post operatively, chemotherapy

and radiation were over-ruled in favor of ingesting a pill (femara) every night for the next five years. To me, this was the least invasive and best alternative. It has been seven years since I was diagnosed and treated for breast cancer. So far...so good! My role as a cancer survivor is promising. Long ago, I learned "with God's help all things are possible." Once again it proved true.

HOW DID YOU REACT TO YOUR HUSBAND'S STROKE?

I was stunned. I was perplexed. I was frightened. The day John had a stroke began with great promise. The sun was bright, our morale was high and our schedule seemed to be "filled with fun." We were invited to join the Shields for dinner, where Jenny, I would prepare for us a gourmet Italian meal. Jenny and her husband, Steve adopted Italy as their "home away from home." Under the sponsorship of the Coast Guard, they lived and learned to love Italy and value the Italian persona. Jenny's meal was to compare "Old Country" heritage with "New World Influence." She questioned how Italian we LaRussa's were. And where better to clarify the dilemma than at the dinner table.

She planned a menu that would please any palate. It included Minestrone zupa, insalata mista, fettuccini Alfredo, gelato agli amaretto, and espresso Italiane. The festivity began with a tantalizing antipasto and a glass of fine wine (commonly referred to as Diego Red). The insalata was mouth watering. Everything was perfect.

While anticipating the fettuccini Alfredo, John's expression changed. He looked startled. He seemed fearful. He was confused. He jumped to his feet and complained of numbness in his lower right leg. He refused assistance and insisted that we go home immediately. Disregarding problematic symptoms, he insisted he could drive his car without help. Miraculously, we arrived home safely. Although, he felt poorly, he refused medical attention and quickly retired to his bed, hopeful that his health problems would disappear during the night. But alas, this did not happen.

The next morning, he awoke with greater deficits. He seemed more confused. He complained of dizziness, he was concerned about right side weakness and lower right leg numbness. I was concerned about

decreased cognitive function and slurred speech. He continued to ignore my plea for medical intervention. So, I recruited the assistance of Nurse Joan and Nurse Mary Kaye. They were available within minutes. Together, they convinced their Dad that if immediate medical assessment and treatment were employed, permanent nerve damage could be minimized. And, when he finally believed this conclusion was his, he agreed to confer with an MD. At last, he was transported to the University Hospital. After a lengthy and thorough examination; his diagnosis was "Cerebral-Vascular Accident" (CVA).

This panicked me! Although I was trained as a nurse, I did not relish the idea of being a care giver to a stroke patient, especially if that patient were my husband. John's unstable balance, halting gait and slurred speech frightened me. I feared further deficits. Death was a haunting thought. This challenge was too great!

For over fifty years, John was the decision maker. He was a doer. With him at the helm, the waters were always manageable. He was a stout-hearted skipper that piloted me and the family through thick and thin. When problems arose and seemed unsolvable they were delegated to and solved by John LaRussa. For years, he guided us thru "good times" and helped us through "not so good times." Without a doubt, he loved us dearly. He provided us with food and fun experiences and was always there when we needed him. Because he was happy and cheerful, he made us happy and cheerful. He was always "good for a laugh." His stories were entertaining; his jokes were funny and his antics amusing. He was a good husband and a good father. After his CVA, his roles as husband and father seemed threatened. I was depressed. My prognosis for John's condition was pessimistic. Each day, his deficits were more vexing. Complete recovery seemed unlikely. I was worried. I was angry. Poor John, how could he adjust to disabilities? In trying times, he was always my "bulwark." Now in this trying time, he himself was in need of a "bulwark."

Poor me, how could I assume a role of overseer, without him. My fragile self-image cried out for my "bulwark." I was desperate. What could I do? Where could I go? I kept asking God, "Why me, Lord?" Slowly, I resumed my equanimity. I was enlightened. "Let go,

let God!" This I tried before and it worked! Now it was time to try again. Well-trained doctors, skilled physical therapists, positive attitudes, and pig-headed determination restored John to his former self. It was an uphill battle. God's help simplified the struggle.

During John's recuperation, I reflected on life's perplexities, prayed for enlightenment and initiated the following changes. These changes affected me as a wife, as a mother, and as a person. I needed to be more independent. When assured of John's recovery, I knew he would rehabilitate at his own speed and in his own way. I vowed not to nag. I planned to be a better wife. To be a better mother, I resolved to be more empathetic and loving. I promised to relinquish my imagined control over my children and allow each one to be the "captain of her/his soul and the master of her/his destiny." At last, I clearly understood and accepted my obligation to "my ten children-turned adults." I promise to love them unconditionally and to pray for them incessantly. With a new found freedom, I could concentrate on developing my own persona.

John's confinement afforded me opportunities to assume more responsibility. My self-image was strengthened. My faith deepened. The words of St. Francis de Sales rang loud and clear: "Have no fear for what tomorrow may bring. The same loving God who cares for you today will take care of you tomorrow and every day. God will either shield you from suffering or give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace, then, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations." I was "reborn." With revived hope, I voiced St. Theresa of Avilla's words of wisdom. "Let nothing disturb you, nothing affright thee. All things change. Who possesses God, needs nothing. God alone is sufficient."

IS THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE TODAY THAN IT WAS FIFTY YEARS AGO?

The safety and sanity of today's world is desperate. Every day, multitudes scream for salvation. Problems both past and present continue to plague society. Struggle, starvation, pain and poverty flaunt humanity's inhumanity to ourselves and to each other. Unmanaged anger and uncontrolled animosity excites constant conflict. Although scientific

knowledge develops and technology continues to offer suggestions for survival, remedies are dismissed or completely disregarded. History verifies that many of today's problems are yesterday's problems revisited. Pollution, hunger, and disease repeatedly threaten world survival. Ignorance, alienated families, forgotten ideals and neglected values, stunt society's growth and development "Is the world a better place today than it was fifty years ago?" I think not.

Then, as now, our world seems desperate. News releases validate our misery. Television relates our suffering. The world today may or may not be worse then it was fifty years ago, but one thing's for certain, "humanity's inhumanity" has instant global exposure and begs for a quick fix. The following is excerpted from a reflection by David Cozad, a member of St James Parish in Kansas City, Missouri. I like what it says and offer it as a panacea to the pandemonium we all seem to be experiencing.

"I am a citizen of the world who believes in life. That means I am against abortion. But it also means that every child that is born—every life—has a fundamental right to decent housing, food, health care and education. Because I am pro-life, I am against the death penalty. And my belief in life means I am a peacemaker. War should always be a last resort and I have grave doubts about any pre-emptive war. I believe in global solidarity. I am just as much a citizen of the world as I am of this country. We should work hard to build relationships with others around the world, not tear them down. We need to seek to understand the root causes of hatred and anger that people feel and find ways to address conditions and injustices that lead people to violence. We need to seek to understand the root causes of hatred and anger so that people feel and find ways to address conditions that lead people to violence. The United States should take a role to alleviate global poverty, relieve crushing debt in developing nations and stem the devastating effects of AIDS. I am a candidate for justice. People deserve a living wage and safe working conditions. I support the right of workers to organize. We urgently need to reform our nation's health care system so that every one has access to affordable health care. I believe we need to care for and stand by immigrants, and see that they are provided with basic rights. We need real welfare reform that does not include just job training, but also

health care and child care for people trying to leave poverty behind. We must end discrimination, and I support well crafted affirmative action programs to overcome discrimination. I believe we need to change our growing culture of violence. I will work for a reduction of violence in the media, and I support restriction on access to assault weapons and handguns. I believe in caring for creation. When we drive a species into distinction so we have a bigger house or drive a bigger car that is a fist in the eye of God. Global warming, destruction of rain forests, the declining health of our rivers and oceans are gathering threats that we must address. Justice means we must leave future generations a healthy environment. And all of these issues are central to the value and dignity of life.”

“And that is all I want to say about that.”

—Forrest Gump



MOM!