

## Rhonda's Reflections

This year I've been on a journey into my mother's remarkable life. I've learned much about her, our family and myself along the way. I am so grateful we undertook this valuable project, and it is with a tinge of sadness that I write this final chapter.

My mother is the first-born daughter of German-speaking immigrants, entering this world right before the outbreak of World War II. The kids at school taunted her about being a Nazi when she spoke German with her sister. But, she is smart, determined, and strong-willed, and she wasn't going to let anyone keep her down. She has her father's keen interest in business and drive to succeed, along with her mother's dedicated loyalty and big heart. They were all determined to create a secure, happy, free life here in America and become good citizens.

She was also born at a time in our history when women were first given a real chance to succeed on their own terms. She chose to enter a predominantly male field and hold her own, rising to a level of great responsibility and earning the respect of her peers. It still astounds me that she worked for 54 years for the Associated General Contractors. I know that they credit her for their survival during the Great Recession. The reserves she insisted on keeping aside helped float the shortfall and keep the organization strong.

She and my father began their life together with nothing, building their future financial security on investments in real estate and rental properties. It was my mother who championed this idea with my father and restrained him from his tendency to overspend and give away too much. Fortunately, he was wise enough to know she was the better money manager! I've also been a beneficiary of her vast financial knowledge.

My father was the love of her life and one of her greatest challenges. They had many wonderful years together in the beginning, as they pursued their mutual dream of raising me on a ranch. I am the person I am today because of that experience and I am grateful to them for the opportunity to grow up close to the land and animals. It wasn't an easy life and my mother worked very hard to support us with her job at AGC, while maintaining the household and working long hours in our huge gardens. I know that it broke her heart when dad slowly descended into mental illness, alcohol abuse, gambling addiction and dementia over the last 35 years of his life.

She dug deep into the well of her love, loyalty and strength to stand by him even in the craziest of times, and there were plenty of those. He understood, accepted and supported her need to get away through her work, friends and travel. I think that is what saved them. They were married 55 years when he passed on from this world, and in the end, they made their peace. We all did. For this, I am so grateful and I'm glad I decided to return home to be part of my father's final years and to be here for my mom now.

I too have been a challenge for my mother. My choices haven't always been the best and I've made plenty of mistakes. I lack her steady devotion to setting a course and sticking with it. So, she's been on a wild ride with me. And no matter what crazy thing I did, she always loved me and didn't judge me. She has taught me to love through disagreements and disappointments, to be tolerant of and patient with others. She showed me how to be a good friend, to reach out and be there for others. My mother is an amazing friend—always there as a support and an escape valve. I'm sure she helped many of her friends to survive their own challenging marriage, family and work relationships by whisking them away on trips!

Mom is an amazing cook and I have many happy memories of helping her in the kitchen and savoring her delicious meals. Being here to cook and eat with her again is one of the great pleasures of returning home.

I've always admired her amazing green thumb. Plants love her and flourish under her diligent care. I'm glad she still has a garden to tend to in the Casitas. This was one of the passions she and my father shared—their love of the earth and growing everything from vegetables to fruit, trees to shrubs, herbs to flowers. There is nothing like the taste of homegrown veggies and fruits.

My mother is also a healer. She is definitely the person you want by your side when you're sick. She has extensive knowledge of herbal remedies and alternative healing methods. A big believer in supplements and vitamins, she is very healthy and she's fortunately passed this on to me. There is a gentle, nurturing side that comes out in her when you are not feeling well, which has always been a big comfort.

She is courageously unafraid of death and dying. When I was six and my Kindergarten teacher was dying, she dropped me off at her house to read to her. She returned a couple of hours later to pick me up. She talked with me about what was happening and helped me to understand that death is a natural part of life. Mom believes in stepping up and being present to the terminally ill, and defending their right to make choices about their dying process. This inspired me to do my graduate internship with Hospice and to take an active role in helping people with their final passages in this life.

My mother is a true optimist. Though she is very grounded in reality, and aware of the darker sides of life and people, she sticks to the light. She focuses on the best and is grateful for the good. I've never seen her depressed or lose heart. We have always shared a mutual curiosity about world religions and spirituality. I once took a course in World Religions and she read the book with me; we spent hours discussing it. When I was young, we would attend different churches just like she did with Grandpa Goertzen in Placerville.

Her home is her sanctuary. She has always created warm, cozy, life-filled spaces in all the places she has lived. I thought it was so telling when I asked her how she wanted to organize this book and she said, "I want to write a chapter for each place I lived."

She also loves to travel, to see new places, experience new things and eat great food. I've been lucky to join her on so many wonderful adventures over the years. Working on the trip sections of this book was a walk down my own travel memory lane. We have seen so much! I remember her always planning the next trip almost as soon as we returned from the last one. It was her escape from the hard parts of her life as well as a passion. I share her love of exploring the world and Scott tells me that I am always planning the next trip **before** I've finished the one we are on!

Mom has a thirst for knowledge, a natural curiosity, and a real passion for history. She shared this with her father who believed that history repeats itself, so it is important to know what has come before. She reads voraciously and loves to discuss what she is learning. She has strong opinions and beliefs, which she is unafraid to share. However, she can also hear other's differing opinions and beliefs and agree to disagree. In her eyes, maintaining a connection is more important than winning an argument, though she loves to argue!

I have always admired her relationship with her sister. They differ from each other in so many ways. They talk every Sunday morning and some of the conversations end in a heated argument. But, the next Sunday morning they are on the phone like nothing happened. I've experienced this many times with mom myself, as we often have differing opinions and approaches.

I remember being afraid of disappointing her when I was younger, fearing that she would stop loving me if I wasn't perfect in her eyes. One of the greatest gifts my mother has given is showing me that her love is truly unconditional and no matter what, she believes in me. Whenever I've made a mess of things in my life, the wings of her love have lifted me up out of the ashes.

Thank you, Mom for being all you are and sharing this amazing life with me. I am truly blessed to have you as my mother and my friend. Here's to the next chapter!