

In Memory of Glenna Correll

My Mother, My Enigma

Tribute Email of John Correll, Glenna's Oldest Son
February 22, 2014

DT: 2014-02-22
RE: Mom's Gone

My mother — Glenna Correll — died last Thursday, February 20, 2014. And the darndest thing is, at this moment I don't exactly know what to say. She remained always an enigma to me. She didn't try to be a mystery, but she was, at least to me. Often I couldn't figure out why she said what she said, or did what she did. Some "mysteries" I would later understand as years went by. Yet, to a degree she still remains a puzzle to this very day.

For two days I've waffled over whether to attempt a write-up. I hesitated because I feared it might not "turn out right." Then I decided I would simply describe some of my strongest memories of her, and that would have to suffice.

Reflecting back on grade school time, I remember that when one of her sons was complaining about something or perhaps saying something negative about another son, she would say, "If you can't say anything good about someone, don't say anything at all." At the time I pretty much blew it off. Decades later I realized what hugely powerful advice that was.

I remember several times when one of her sons would be teasing another one, and much angst would be resulting, she would ask the perpetrator of the teasing "Why are you doing that?" And the kid would say, "Because it's fun." And Mom would say, "Sure, all fun for the hunter, no fun for the rabbit."

I remember when I was in grade school, I was perhaps the only kid on the block who wasn't allowed to watch Soupy Sales during lunchtime. Mom's reasoning: Soupy had bad manners.

I remember when I was around twelve, my friend Pete told me of this "great fishing lake loaded with bass" — Loon Lake, I believe — which was located north of Pontiac. I asked Dad if he would take me fishing there that day. He said, "No, I have work." Mom then said, to my eye-opening surprise, "I'll take you. Get your fishing stuff." We drove a distance that seemed like an eternity, and eventually found the lake and then found the boat livery on the lake. She rented a boat and we went out onto the water. She didn't fish. She just sat in the boat and watched

me as I rowed from spot to spot, fishing here and there. I couldn't figure out at the time why she was doing this (of course, years later it became apparent). After a couple hours we went back in, drove home, and had dinner.

I remember as a kid that in those early years Dad found humor in flatulence. On more than one occasion during family dinner he would stick out his big fat index finger in front of a kid sitting next to him and say, "Quick, pull my finger." The kid would dutifully pull Dad's finger and Dad would rip off a big one. And everyone at the table would belly laugh, except for Mom, who would shout "Melvin, stop that!" And then some kid would say, "Yeh, Melvin, stop that!" And laughter would resume.

I remember the Christmas when I was about fifteen, Mom had taken up the hobby of restoring antique furniture. This, of course, is a hobby that involves extensive hand sanding. Which posed a problem for Mom, because she wasn't one to do hand sanding. Her solution: delegate the task to her eldest son. I couldn't figure out why the heck she was pursuing a hobby that she wasn't going to do but that required me to do. (And I still haven't figured it out.) Soon Christmas rolled around. That morning we opened presents for the usual half hour or so, and then Dad pulled out this big wrapped box and handed it to Mom. You could see the gleeful look in his eyes as Mom proceeded to unwrap it. And you could see the excited look on Mom's face. Finally she got the wrapping off. Then her face went blank, and she began to stare into nothingness. The box contained a *power vibrating sanding* — the perfect tool for making short work of the tedious task of hand sanding antique furniture. I thought, "Wow, the perfect gift." And Dad expected her to be rapturous with joy. After about a half minute, and without saying a word, Mom got up, walked into the bedroom, and went to bed. She stayed silently in bed for the rest of the day. Dad took over finishing Christmas dinner, which Mom didn't attend. At the time I couldn't figure out why she responded that way, and I still haven't figured it out.

By the time I reached high school I was bringing home bad grades. So, report card time contained tense moments. One time, during my junior year, I presented an unusually bad card. Mom, Dad, and I had the usual evening report card meeting. Dad was expressing his thoughts on my bad grades and, somewhere along the line, I made a smart remark. This triggered Dad to whollop me upside the head. My glasses flew across the room. And Mom began screaming "Melvin, Melvin ...!" Mom's response defused Dad and my glasses were returned to me undamaged. But Mom's response had converted the smack into a comedy. I didn't dare laugh out loud, but the scene of my glasses flying across the room and Mom screaming "Melvin, Melvin" filled me with silent mirth.

I recall one evening during my senior year I was out with some buddies. One

of them managed to bring a bottle of peppermint schnapps. So, for the first time of my life I drank alcoholic beverage. After the first few swigs I waited for something to happen. But nothing did. So I kept having more. Then suddenly I was drunk. About midnight I was dropped off at home. Dad was out on a catering job and all the lights were off. So I figured "I'm home free." I stealthily tip-toed into the house, went upstairs to my bedroom, undressed, and went to bed. About a minute went by. Then my bedroom door burst open and Mom walked in. She came over to my bed and put her nose down to about three inches of my face. And then exclaimed, "You've been drinking! If your father was here you'd be in *real* trouble right now!" Then she turned around and stomped out. I figured, tomorrow morning the shit's gonna hit the fan. I got up the next morning, brushed my teeth, and went downstairs, figuring "this is it." Dad was there and Mom was there. Mom smiled sweetly and said "good morning." Dad finished his usual routine and went to work. Not a single word of me coming in drunk. And, amazingly, it was never spoken of since. As it turned out, Mom *never told Dad about what I had done*. I've never figured out why she didn't, but I was most grateful for it at the time.

I remember that during that same period, before going out on a date I would apply some Canoe aftershave lotion (the generally-recognized love potion by teenage boys of the time). On one of those times Dad stopped me in the living room as I was heading out. Standing behind him was Mom. Dad said, "What do you have on — you smell like a French whore." Smartass me replied, "How do *you* know what a French whore smells like?" Dad looked like he was preparing to give me another smacking. But, Mom, standing behind him, could hardly contain herself from breaking out in laughter. It took me totally by surprise; it seemed wholly out of character for her. (As it turned out, Dad just told me to not be a smart Alec, and I left.)

To cover college cost, I paid for the first semester, Dad paid for the second. When I entered college my goal was to become a doctor. So I studied diligently the first two years and got good grades, even a scholarship. But when I went back my junior year I had dropped the doctor goal. So, instead of studying I spent many evenings drinking beer in the local taverns. My grades plummeted. During semester break, when report cards had been sent home, Dad said to me, "I'm low on money and you're clearly not studying any more, so I'm not paying for second semester." So for the entire spring I lived at home and worked in the family catering business. During this time the Vietnam war was escalating and draft calls were growing. Long story short, by June I had lost my student deferment status and I had received notice from the draft board to report for duty in 30 days.

The next morning Mom asked me what I was going to do. I said, "I'm going to

join the Navy.”

She instantly retorted, “Oh, no you’re not. I had my husband go to war and come back with one eye shot out. I knew what that war was for. I have no idea what this Vietnam thing is for. And I’m not having anyone else in my family being used for cannon fodder. You just get into summer school.”

I laughed and told her it was past enrollment time for summer school and I was going into the Navy.

She said, “Get me the registrar’s phone number and *I’ll* get you into summer school.” So I gave her the phone number, knowing full well that she was pursuing a pipedream and I would be in the Navy in a couple weeks.

Mom went into the den where the phone was. A few minutes later she emerged and said, to my great surprise, “Summer school starts next Monday. The dean said if you come in this morning he’ll make a special arrangement for you to enroll in couple open classes. So get over there and get into school.”

To placate Mom I said, “Okay, I’ll do that, but I’m certain the draft board won’t change my draft status at this late date. So I’ll be going into the Navy anyhow.”

I did the hour-and-a-half drive to Adrian College and enrolled in two obscure courses. The next morning I had to take my re-enrollment paper to the draft board in Pontiac. Mom said she’d come along for the ride. I knew this entire exercise was a waste of time, but I did it to please Mom, and also so she would finally face the reality of the situation: The draft board wasn’t going to reinstate my student deferment, and my only solution for staying out of the Army was to join the Navy.

So Mom and I took the 30-minute ride to downtown Pontiac where the draft board was located. Once there I started circling the block to find a parking spot. I began getting impatient, as I knew it was all a waste of time. Then I got this great idea. I said, “Hey, Mom, I’ve been inside there several times in the past five months talking to those draft board women. It hasn’t changed a thing. I’ll give you the paper and *you* go in and talk to them.” She said okay, took the paper, jumped out of the car, and went in. And I continued circling the block. I knew for certain it was all a waste of time, and that in a few minutes I’d be picking up a very disappointed woman at the curb in front of the draft office. But, at least her pipedream of her son having a deferment would finally be put to rest.

After about 10 minutes of circling, I came upon Mom standing by the curb. I pulled up and stopped. She jumped in, slammed the door shut, and then slapped a paper into my lap and said, “*Here’s* your deferment. Now, get into college and *stay there!*” I was flabbergasted that somehow she got those women draft board

staffers to instantly respond to her, when they had never responded to me. But her tenacity plus a few magic minutes in the building changed the course of my life.

A few years later, Mom and Dad and most of the family moved to Winter Park, Florida. Dad reopened the catering business, but it was never to become what it had been in Birmingham, Michigan. He made some income, but many years it wasn't a huge amount. So Mom soon went to work. Her "reason" was that she had to work to help with income. But, truth be known, it was also an excuse. In many ways Mom was a classic conservative woman/wife/mother of the old school. She knitted, didn't smoke or drink, didn't swear, was always properly attired and well-mannered, attended a conservative church every Sunday, had strict moral standards, was a strong believer in chastity until marriage, and supported family values and lifestyle in every way, except for one: she hated the chores of household living — washing, cleaning, fixing meals were off her list of what she should be doing. Instead, she had a burning desire to work, to pursue a career outside the home. To me, all this just compounded the Mom enigma.

So, one day — and against Dad's wishes — Mom retrieved her college transcript showing she had a BA degree in home economics, and applied for a teaching job in the local area school system. She applied to be a teacher in a baking program. She was about 50 then, and hadn't held a job her entire life, which meant she had never been a teacher. But, amazingly, she talked her way into it. Perhaps using the same "magic technique" she had used at the draft board in Pontiac, Michigan in 1965.

Then for the next 25 years she proceeded to create and teach baking courses for adult education and, I believe, a local community college. And she loved it. And, from all accounts, did it very well and was highly respected for it.

And, of course, she made money at it. Dad never had much instinct for money-saving and investing. But Mom thrived on it. And, so, for 25 years she made, saved, and invested money in various ways. Her income helped with family support. But, perhaps most important of all, it helped pay for a very nice home in Winter Park, Florida, which by the time they "retired" in 2006 would be worth a substantial sum.

Long story short, Mom's passion for pursuing a paying career from age 50 to 75, plus her zest for money-saving and investing, created a tidy financial nest egg for Mom and Dad. And, it turned out to be a nest egg that would benefit not just them but their entire family. Any time one of her six sons was temporarily unemployed, or had a financial emergency, or needed education money, or needed some extra funds to pursue a great investment opportunity or to help pay for an emergency medical problem, that money was there. Mom and Dad would

generously help out, and their ability to do this was, more than any other factor, a result of Mom's career as a baking teacher who thriftily saved and invested her income for 25 years.

Now to a flashback: In spring of 1944 Mom was pregnant with me (her soon-to-be first child). Dad, who was in the Army, was moved to be stationed in Lake Charles, Louisiana. So they moved to Lake Charles. A few weeks before I was born, Dad was shipped overseas, where he would eventually fight in the Battle of the Bulge. Mom stayed in Lake Charles. In May she gave birth to me. She lived there for a short spell with her newborn son. Eventually, mother and son would leave Louisiana and travel to Washington, DC to live with Mom's parents — Grandma and Grandpa Potts.

In their early years in Florida I didn't visit Mom and Dad much. But by 1990 I began seeing more of them. About ten years ago during one of the annual family get-togethers there was a poignant moment. I had just arrived at the house and was in the living room. No one was in the room but me. Then Mom came around the corner and stopped and looked at me. And then walked slowly up to me and stopped close in front of me and looked up into my eyes. And then very slowly said, "You know, at one time *it was just you and me.*" There was a few seconds of silence. And then I replied, "I know."

At that moment I realized that Mom had just summed up the essence of the relationship between her and me. At one time, in a brief period "long ago" in 1944, during the height of World War II, when her husband was in a foreign land fighting in the biggest war of all time, and she was living in a unfamiliar place that wasn't her home — it was just her and her first-born son. Which just happened to be me. Perhaps that's part of the reason why Mom displayed such indomitable drive to keep her first-born in college and out of Vietnam back in the summer of 1965.

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In 2006, Mom and Dad "retired" and moved from their home in Winter Park, Florida to live with brother Bob and his wife Gail in Gaffney, South Carolina. Bob and Gail have cared for them since that time. Dad, as you may know, died in 2009 at age 90. Mom, of course, passed on two days ago at age 93.

As an ending note, yesterday I realized that with Mom's departure I became the senior member of the Correll family, the next in line to "take to the sky." It's a strange feeling. And then I realized that when Mom's brother — Uncle Chet — passes I'll be the senior member of both the Correll and Potts families, compounding the strange feeling.

Yesterday I was pondering what the best way is to honor a parent. And then it

came to me. The best way for anyone to honor any parent is: Strive for the rest of your life to become the finest person you can be. So, Mom — here's to you.

And now that I've gotten this email written, I give myself permission to weep.

Best to each of you,

John



Glenna and Melvin Correll — 50th Wedding Anniversary, 1992