

Memories of Mac Willoughby

By John Willoughby

Born in 1926 as Elaine Macmann, she acquired the nickname “Mac” and it stuck. Most of you knew her as Mac. I can’t actually recall anyone calling her Elaine except for my grandmother, who I’m sure had high hopes for the name at one point. Some of you may have known her as Mrs. Willoughby, a title she was proud to wear since she did seem to be more than a little fond of my father. There were an array of other names and titles acquired over the years, like the recent “Mother Goose”.

But whatever you called her, out of almost 7 billion people in the world I am the only one who had the privilege of calling her “mom”. A very exclusive club, and one that I am richer for being a member of.

We gather today to say goodbye and honor her memory. I prefer to think of it as celebrating a full and wonderful life, but then I tend to look at a glass and not only point out that it is half-full, but that it is wonderful that we have such a useful glass in the first place. My mother would probably have added a quote from a favorite children’s book, perhaps Eeyore who once said about a similar container that it was, “very useful for putting things in.” Optimism. I get that from my mother.

My mother has been described as a force of nature. I think maybe it’s more accurate to call her a force of humanity. She was fascinated by life. By the people in it, by the history of it, by the architecture and the customs and the gardens and flowers. But she didn’t just watch life – she lived it and engaged with it. She touched many lives over the years in many different ways and was grateful for the friendships and experiences she received.

And giving back was very important to her. She always heeded the call to help those displaced by disaster or circumstance, or to support the arts and preserve our cultural wealth. In 1970 she wrote a book on the history of the Strawberry Banke Museum as a fundraiser. She published the book herself and it was sold at the museum to whom she donated the profits.

I also remember, in true Tom Sawyer fashion, that she somehow managed to talk me into volunteering to paint the fences that summer at Strawberry Banke. It's been a while since I've painted any fences, but giving back to the community is important to me as well. I get that from my mother.

My mother loved England, although she was fiercely proud of being an American. England was a wonderful place to visit and enjoy the art, the culture, the dry humor, and the civilized institutions like Tea Time. She found beauty as well as delightful humor in England and she loved the occasional eccentricities she ran across.. One of her favorite stories was about a man she met in a village whose house had had plumbing added long after it was built, and some of the pipes ran along the outside of the building. When asked whether the pipes didn't occasionally freeze, the man replied, "Well, yes, but when they do they're so easy to get at!" She thought this was wonderfully droll.

We spent several magical years when I was growing up living in London, and even back in the states the BBC provided us with shared drama, comedy and human interest. Together we enjoyed many episodes of "Poldark", "Upstairs Downstairs", "The Two Ronnies", and others. I must confess that while I also love America, I too am a bit of an Anglophile as well. I get that from my mother.

She loved gardens – English gardens most of all – but really any gathering of two or more plants that could be arranged. And this may be a place where she could well be called a force of nature. She carefully researched the individual plants, architected the layout, oversaw the construction, and then watched as it all grew into a finished product. Over the years many of us have signed up as assistant gardeners and construction crew, and felt the kinship of helping to build and maintain a Mac Willoughby creation. And even in the garden she found humor. She loved to quote one of her English gardening books which said about a certain rose that "it does better in a bed than up against a wall. But," the book continued, "most of us do." While I will never be the gardener she was, I too love growing things and feel at home with the brown earth between my fingers. I get that from my mother.

But there were areas where we differed as well.

She loved to explore and try new ideas and had a wonderful sense of whimsy. Unfortunately this sense of exploration would sometimes extend to her computer and I would get a frantic phone call. There were times when not only did I not know how she had done what she had done to her computer, I didn't even know it was possible to do what she had done. When pressed for an explanation she would look thoughtful and reply, "Well, I just thought I'd try something a little different". Now I am an engineer and have a very symbiotic relationship with computers, and these sessions sometimes led me to wonder whether perhaps I had actually been adopted.

She loved opera and thought Jose Carreras was a minor deity. I know there are opera lovers and even opera singers here today so let's just say that I respect your art but it is not my cup of tea. And she felt the same about my music but would have used much stronger language to describe it. And after listening some more extreme examples of my musical taste she probably began wondering if maybe they hadn't accidentally switched babies in the hospital, or at least dropped me rather hard on my head and neglected to mention it.

But of all her loves, none compare to her love of children. She enjoyed teaching children, she enjoyed reading to children, she enjoyed writing for children, and she enjoyed teaching other teachers how to teach children. She loved her grand-children dearly and I do believe she might even have been a tiny bit fond of me as well. At least until I grew older and started listening to horrible music.

The one thing I haven't touched on yet is my father. I've saved the best for last. My mother was very fond of classical music, but I do not believe that she married my father just for the free concert tickets. For 55 years they shared a wonderful life together, having so many great experiences and exciting adventures. I know that she loved him, and I know that she felt loved in return. He made her happy.

So here we are. A friend said to me: “It’s like when a prized chair is taken from the room. At first there is this big empty hole in the room where the chair used to be. After a while you re-arrange the furniture and the hole goes away, but you will always know that something is missing from the room.”

And so we move on, and rearrange the furniture of our lives. And in time the hole goes away though we will always know that someone is missing. But then we will see a garden; hear a song; touch a heart ... and she is with us again. Let’s celebrate Elaine Macmann Willoughby. The one you called Mac. The one I was proud to call mom.