

The Last Thing on Her List

By Dennis Knight

Mom always had several lists going. There would be a running grocery list, of course, but she had others for the holidays and all her projects. At night she would lie awake making mental lists to be quickly jotted down when she rose. It was how she managed to get so much stuff done, and we know she loved the process.

Dad tended to spontaneity and often announced the family was leaving the next day for faraway places, or maybe he would sweep Mom off for a night of dancing in Denver. Whatever the moment, Mom would put together a list and check it off in what seemed like minutes. Dad's impulsiveness was a challenge she lived for.

As the daughter of a Methodist preacher and his wife serving in various communities in eastern Colorado, Geraldine had come to enjoy the large Catholic farming families on the plains, and dreamed of some day having many children herself. I don't think we ever heard her say that she had made a grand plan for her life, but after graduating from college, she found work at a nursery for the babies of migrant workers in Alamosa. It was there she had a blind date with Mickey Knight, the eleventh and youngest in a family of railroaders. The spontaneous Irishman proposed at the dance that same night and they were married soon after. Was it all according to plan? Probably.

The young family grew to two children, struggled out of the depression and moved to Laramie where Dad found a lifetime of employment on the Union Pacific Railroad and they resumed growing their family. Mom always said she wanted to have eleven kids, but stopped when Timmy came along at number seven. Obviously, she had a change in plans, to which she was entitled.

Planning served her well in running her household with efficiency over the years with time to lead our Catholic school's parent-teacher group. She made lists and plans for the beautiful weddings of her daughters and granddaughters.

She was President of the Altar and Rosary Society when our parish priest died, and planned the beautiful send-off of the elderly Monsignor. Her volunteer work with the county Democratic committee was just the job for a list maker. On the side, she sold real estate and worked in a retail store to build credits for social security.

Dad passed away on June 8, 1987, and Mom thrived for seventeen more years, regularly making and executing plans of all sorts. After my sister Maureen and her husband had been transferred to Las Vegas, Mom and my other sister Kathi, who was by then divorced, decided to band together and move to Vegas as well. What with realtors and movers, you can imagine the reams of lists that were created with that upheaval. A few years later, Kathi remarried and Mom went to live with Maureen.

In 2004, to celebrate her ninetieth birthday, we had a big party in Colorado which was quietly organized by her granddaughter Rebecca, herself an inveterate list maker. When Mom finally was told about the event, she rallied, enthusiastically planning and making lists for Maureen and Kathi to follow in getting her properly attired and all the way to Denver for the celebration.

In June of 2004, her health was failing rapidly, but evidently she wasn't quite through planning. There was a day when she was exceptionally spry and lucid, and Kathi and Maureen had spent the day with her, laughing and sharing the fun. The next day, a Thursday, after lunch, she asked Maureen, "Did you call Kathi?"

"No, why was I supposed to call Kathi?"

"Well, it's time for me to go."

Maureen, a little incredulously, called Kathi and told her what Mom had said. Neither of them took it completely seriously, but they both stayed closer, and Mom was able to check another to-do off her list.

Late on Friday evening, with both of her daughters present but in bed, Kathi heard her cry out in prayer, and then she was quiet. Sometime that night, she had a massive stroke and passed into a coma. Geraldine Byrda Payton Knight died on Tuesday, June 8th, 2004, exactly on the anniversary of the passing of our dad, her husband, in 1987. Most of us have no doubt that she had planned it to the day. It was the last thing on her list.