

A Lifetime of Memories

By Jeff Girod, published June 28, 2008

Evelyn Margaret Millett Johnson saw the dawning of 90 winters, springs and summers — longer than any of us had the right to ask for or imagine.

She far exceeded the expectations of even her own mother, who reflexively scoffed when Evelyn, still a child, asked, “Mommy, will I live to the year 2000?”

That’s when Evelyn’s mother, still reaching to put something in a cupboard, hesitated, turned and thoughtfully reconsidered.

“Well,” she said. “Maybe.”

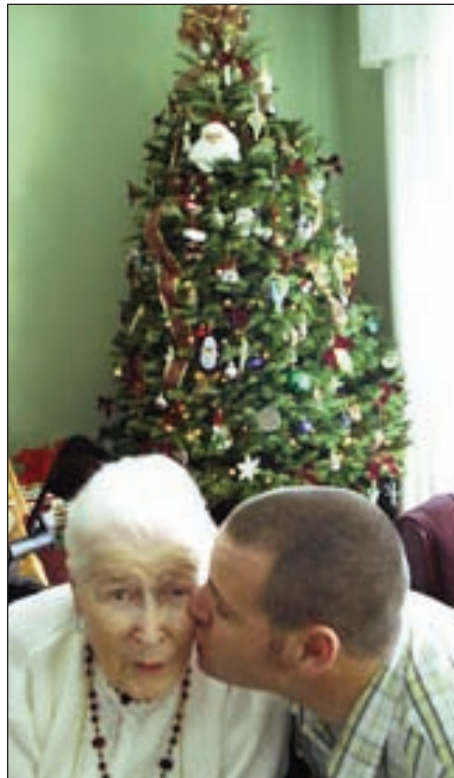
There were very few “maybes” in Evelyn’s long and steady life. She would either find a way or she’d make one.

Evelyn was a “women’s liber” long before anyone thought to invent the term. She drove a taxi, led Bible classes at her church and ran the tightest of ships as the business manager of a local medical center.

It was about this time I met Evelyn, or “Grandma” as I started calling her, once I was old enough to form the word.

The bigger I grew, the smaller Grandma seemed. No longer was she the authoritarian and last-minute baby-sitter. Slowly she morphed into a smiling white tuft of hair crooked inside an arm in Christmas and graduation photographs.

Then, after she was diagnosed with breast cancer, I made a point to visit her kitchen at least one hour every Saturday, taking advantage of “what little time we



had left.”

Find a way or make one.

Fifteen years, five more bouts with cancer and countless medical treatments later, I was still traveling every weekend to visit that kindly old face with the dancing blue eyes. And something unexpectedly wonderful happened along the way.

She wasn’t just “Grandma” to me anymore. She was Evelyn, a funny, intelligent, insightful, spiritual, courageous, compassionate, beautiful, graceful woman and one of my closest and most cherished friends.

Every trip to see Evelyn was a journey through the 20th century. There was her first memory of her father, when she was just a toddler standing in the front yard, eyeing a weary serviceman, fresh from the Great War.

Or the 5-cent piece, melted and jagged, she saved all those years until recently, a memento from the night she found a 2-year-old stunned but unharmed, reaching distance from a short-circuited electrical outlet.

“I thought for sure that should’ve killed you,” she said.

Granted, there were things we didn’t agree upon — she remained convinced the world was ending and saw no use for a device that could store 20,000 songs — but we always found common ground.

We agreed Santa Barbara was one of the most beautiful places either of us had ever seen. And we even enjoyed watching the occasional Lakers and UCLA game. “How do they make that ball go in the tiny hole?” she marveled.

Toward the end of her life, Evelyn was weaker and frailer but her determination never wavered. Just a few months ago, a doctor gave her the choice of hospice care or another round of ravaging chemotherapy, unthinkable for a woman of 90.

Find a way or make one.

Evelyn chose the chemo.

And there was another, softer moment, shortly before Evelyn moved into an assisted living facility, when she feared our weekly visits might come to an abrupt stop.

She tugged at my shirt sleeve, drew me near and whispered, “Please don’t forget about me.”

I promise, Grandma. That will never happen.