



Sandra Crawford's story of

Mary



My Mother's story is more than overcoming the challenge of cancer and living with a disability. It is an example of the astonishing triumph of the human spirit over adversity.

My Mom, Mary Quon, never had what people would call an easy life. Her parents moved to Canada from China during World War II. My grandmother was pregnant, and Mary became their passport baby when she was born here in 1942. My grandparents had met in China, became business partners, and eventually husband and wife. They owned and operated a hotel in Vancouver on East Hastings (a.k.a skid row), frequented by prostitutes and drug addicts.

My Mom and her little sister Louise were placed in the care of nannies, receiving visits from their mother only once a month. Their last nanny kept them sitting in front of the stove and fed them rice and hot water. My Mom showed her determination and strength when, at the age of seven, she took her little sister and ran away from the nanny. Unfortunately, the only place they had to run to was to their parents and life inside the hotel. Her father was angry with her and wanted to send her to China. Instead, for the next two years, any time she was not at school, Mom spent working as a maid in the hotel, cleaning toilets, scrubbing floors, doing laundry and maintaining sixty-five rooms with her sister and parents. My Mom and her sister slept, ate and did their homework in one room.

When my Mom was nine, my mother's father shipped her to Hong Kong to the care of his first wife. He wanted her to learn Chinese and the Chinese culture. However, his first wife hated my grandmother, his second wife in Vancouver, and was not enthusiastic about rearing her daughter. My Mom was treated like a stranger in the home, sleeping in the servant's quarters. She told me that she was a slave. After four bleak years in Hong Kong, it was with great relief that a family crisis resulted in her return to Vancouver. The province of B.C. questioned my grandparents on their family allowance cheques, wanting proof that they had two children. At age thirteen my Mom was sent back to Vancouver. She was happy to be reunited with her sister and mother.

When my Mom was sixteen, my grandmother gave her her very first (!) birthday party. She felt so special in her long black skirt and high heels. At this party she met Pat Crawford, who became her sweetheart, her first love. Pat's family did not have much money, and he could barely afford a present for my Mom. He told me that at her party he was so nervous, he accidentally tipped over an ashtray, shattering it when it hit the ground. My grandfather was not impressed.

Within a couple of months, my Mom and Dad decided to go "steady"; she wore his ring around her neck, feeling so proud. With my Dad she could take her mind away from her family and home. My Mom didn't like the tradition in Chinese culture of treating women as second class, and she never felt that way with my Dad. My grandfather did not approve of my Dad. My Dad is Caucasian, and since Mom was of Chinese descent, this was a big issue for a lot of people, especially their families. When my Dad proposed marriage and my mother accepted, my grandfather disowned my Mom and returned to Hong Kong, leaving my grandmother, my Mom and my aunt to run the hotel. It was sold soon after.

In 1964, at age 22, my Mom married her sweetheart from Britannia High School, my Dad, Pat.

The following year, my Mom faced a health challenge that shaped the rest of her life. One day she had a sudden pain down her leg and was taken to hospital. They believed she had a pinched nerve, and something happened in the emergency spinal cord operation that led to her being paralyzed from the waist down. They said she had a fifteen percent chance of walking again. My grandmother said it was my Mom's fault that she had become disabled, and now her husband would surely leave her. Of course he did not.

My Dad was adamant that my Mom not live the life of an invalid. He said, "Together, we will overcome this." For the next four years, it was hospital, therapy and rehabilitation. My Dad's devotion was unwavering. He was there daily after work; he would spend the weekends keeping her company, helping, supporting and encouraging her to try just a little more each day.

Through incredible determination and perseverance at G. F. Strong Rehabilitation Centre, she slowly gained the use of some of her muscles. Bit by bit she gained movement in her legs. She learned to swing her hips in order to get her stiff legs to walk. She told people, "Part of who I am today is because Pat was there with total commitment and patience. It was tough love. I think he also had an invisible whip in his hand."

Her recovery was somewhat delayed by the unexpected but joyful news that she was pregnant! They had been told they had a fifteen percent chance of ever having children and, having no feeling below her waist, Mom didn't know for six months that she had beaten the odds.

On January 2, 1968, after months in hospital, and with a cheering medical team, she was born. My Mom and Dad were ecstatic; she was perfect. They named her Tracy Louise Crawford, a.k.a. TLC (my sister).

After the birth of a healthy daughter, my Mom continued her rehabilitation and improved sufficiently to walk with a cane.

On July 17, 1970, they were blessed again with another little girl. They named me Sandra Marie Crawford because of my gorgeous strawberry blonde hair. (Those were Mom's words, by the way!)

My Chinese grandmother (or pau pau) came to live with us for a short time. After she learned to trust my Dad, she loved him. Non-Chinese people are called lo fun, and my grandmother called my Dad "no fun lo fun", her few words in English. She and Mom would be in the kitchen all the time, cooking and talking.

My Mom and Dad raised their children with no outside help. Mom's words: "Right from the beginning, our two daughters were intuitively sensitive. They knew their Mom had a disability, and they were not in any way demanding of attention. Pat and I had an easy time raising them. As an adult, I have a fantastic mother/daughter relationship with them. I can not find words to describe the love and devotion that they have for Pat and me. They are the "joy" that enables us to weather all challenges. Without their love our life would not be complete."

Once my sister and I were both in school, my Mom worked at Scotiabank and volunteered with the BC Paraplegic Association. When the Rick Hanson's "Man in Motion" campaign started, she found fulltime work there. She became good friends with Rick, and he gave her a red racing wheelchair! This led to employment with the BC Housing Management Commission, where she worked for the next fifteen years.

Once a week we'd go to Chinatown for dinner, my sister and I holding each of Mom's arms as my Dad drove around the block looking for parking. On Friday nights we would go to Mom's cousin's house and play mahjong, smoking and drinking until very late at night.

My mother loved to argue just for the sake of it. And so do I. She made me look up "attitude" in the dictionary. She demanded that everyone do their best and was not above poking you with her cane if she thought you were shirking.

The greatest joys in my Mom's life were her grandchildren.

On May 4, 1992, her youngest daughter, Sandy (me), gave birth to their grandson Brandon Patrick Crawford. From day one, this child brought so much joy and happiness to her life. Brandon and my Mom had a unique bond and, I swear, could read each other's minds. They would laugh together without jokes, play games endlessly. Today Brandon is twenty years old. He has my Mom's spirit; they are still connected, never breaking their bond.

In Mom's words: "What I did not know about unconditional love, I've learned from Brandon. There is never a day that goes by that he doesn't say 'I love you, Grandma.' I would reply, 'I love you too.' He would then say, 'I love you more.' That one phrase touches the depths of my soul and warms my heart."

In August 1998, their grandparent status increased with the addition of my stepchildren Rachel and Robert. Mom accepted them fully as family, playing chopstick games with them and encouraging them to have fun

Where many would have floundered, my Mom found strength and resolve through her hardships as a child and from her disability. She believed that her disability assisted her in becoming a better person, more caring and compassionate. Her grace and determination in facing the obstacles in her life with such a positive attitude inspired her friends. My Mom never complained or wanted to be treated differently. She even resolved her relationship with my grandparents and was able to forgive them for her bleak childhood, knowing that they had done the best that they were able to.

It was also during this time that she re-assessed her life. She had many unanswered questions, like: Who am I? Why is life so physically difficult? There has to be more ... a reason, a purpose, a meaning. She was on a mission to find some answers.

In her search she found comfort in the worlds of psychology, philosophy and metaphysics. The more my Mom read on these subjects, the more excited and curious she became. Her mission led her to discover her spirituality, to realize she was more than just a body, that she also had a soul. The discovery of this new faith gave her strength, courage, determination and endurance.

All this knowledge served a purpose when in February 2001 Mom was again challenged with a health problem. A biopsy confirmed that she had stage-three ovarian cancer.

Mom was offered the opportunity to participate in a clinical study to treat her tumour with a new approach. Mom accepted the offer, as she felt her participation in this study might benefit other women in the future. She underwent a set of chemotherapy treatments that significantly shrank her tumour, and then had surgery to remove it on May 31, 2001. Over the course of the next five and a half years, she had continual chemo and radiation treatments and four major surgeries.

In May of 2006, my Mom decided to discontinue further treatment and allow her body to take its own course. After all the years of not having control over her body, she decided it was her turn to make a decision and be in control.

She had a living celebration of life, with all of her close friends and family in attendance. During this time, she wrote 99 percent of this story, much of which I have edited into the past tense.

My Mom is the strongest, most beautiful, courageous, loving, admirable person I have ever known. She is my mentor, my hero, and the wind beneath my wings. I am so proud to be a part of her.

Mom passed away on October 16, 2006, with her sister, my Dad, my sister, me and her grandchildren by her side.

Many donations from family and friends have been donated to the Canadian Cancer Society in memory of my Mom.

We will forever miss her ...