



Joan Cregan's story of

Ruth



My mother, Ruth Sarjeant, was born in 1908 in Barrie, Ontario, the youngest of three girls. Her father was the second youngest of thirteen children who came to Canada from England after Confederation in 1867, attracted by the offer of large tracts of Crown land. Her father's older siblings and male cousins began a very successful lumber business in town, and my grandfather devoted his life to that business.

Mom's mother had been born in Montreal, but her parents died when she was very young, so she was raised by an uncle who was a United Church minister in Barrie. He was also part of a large extended family. My mother grew up with the security and happiness of a large family network, and she maintained that spirit towards her own family all her life.

She completed high school by age sixteen, and because she showed intellectual brightness, her family encouraged her to go to university. It was 1924, and this was something no one else in the family had done. But there was a catch! She could not go to the University of Toronto until age eighteen, so she was enrolled in a female "finishing school" in town and was then sent to boarding school at Alma College, where she studied violin.

Mother began U of T in 1926, residing in Victoria College, one of the female residences. Studying Greek and Latin, she was thinking of teaching – what other career choices were there for women at that time? She loved living in the women's residence because it was so close to downtown and, with all the friends she made there, she became engrossed in the ballets, orchestral performances and plays performed at the marvelous Massey Hall and Royal Alex Theatre.

In 1927, during Christmas holidays at home, she and one of her high school chums were skating on the lake at the town's doorstep when they were met by another schoolmate, Sid, and his older brother, Reginald. Reg Godden was known all over town as the talented pianist who played for the silent movies at the Barrie opera house. When the "talkies" took over, he had moved to Toronto, where he graduated from the Conservatory of Music and was now carving out a career in classical music. Their paths kept crossing, and Mom introduced him to the wonders of ballet and other musical genres that captivated her.

After graduation in 1930, Mom attended Teacher's College in Toronto until Christmas, when she decided she would not make it as a teacher and returned to Barrie. The following June, she and Reg were married. Then they returned to Toronto, where Reg had formed a duo piano team with another graduate of the Toronto Conservatory. The duo played across the country and in the U.S. Dad was also making solo appearances and teaching. However, musicians in the 1930s made very little money. Mom and Dad moved from house to house, and, to augment some financial support from her father, mother rented rooms out to boarders, either other starving musicians or single women friends from school intent on establishing careers in the big city.

By 1934, Mom had two children, Barry (1932), and me (1934), and wishing to maintain close relations with her extended families, would take us to Barrie to her father's summer house. Both Mom's and Dad's relatives would spend many hours together swimming, boating, fishing, playing croquet, badminton and horseshoes, and having sing-alongs at the piano. It was Mom's favourite time of year.

In 1939, Mom and Dad moved to a more permanent location in North Toronto. The musical duo broke up because of the war, and Dad became a fixture of the Toronto musical scene. No matter what house we were living in, the living room was out of bounds. It was the home of the grand piano, the teaching and entertaining space. Mom loved all the music that occurred in that room. Life at home became busier with the birth of Wendy in 1940, followed by Robert in 1942. Mom alleviated the feelings of being housebound

by welcoming Dad's musical friends into our home. They would have numerous gatherings where she even had the chance to play her violin.

Both during and after the war, Mom involved us in many musical experiences, such as the Toronto Children's Chorus (singing "The Children's Crusade" in Massey Hall), piano and cello lessons and amateur sing-alongs with children of musical families connected to the Conservatory. She continued her friendships with school chums in Toronto and enjoyed being part of the neighbourhood network of families.

Complications began after her mother died in 1942. Her father began a relationship with a Florida widow, and in 1947 they married. The new wife and her extended family moved to Barrie to become part of the company and the Barrie community. Mom felt totally estranged!

However, she couldn't dwell on her father's actions. In the summer of 1948, we moved to Hamilton, Ontario, where my father had been appointed Principal of the Hamilton Conservatory of Music. They bought a large house and Mom again took in boarders. One was a Hungarian refugee violinist, Arthur Guarami, who excited the family and community with his amazing talent, and who gave us insight as to what was happening in the rest of the world.

Shortly after our move, her father died, and an inheritance made Mom realize he hadn't abandoned her and her family at all. Since Dad never learned to drive, Mom was thrilled to buy and drive the first family car. She also wanted to feed her growing travel bug. In the summer of 1949, she arranged an exciting escapade for herself, Dad, and Barry and me, now in our teens. We went by CNR, then on the El Capitan train to California, to the summer music camp where Dad had been studying Bach for many summers, then to San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco and back home, stopping at the Grand Canyon on the way.

Then, in order to keep her position in her father's company secure, Mom sponsored Barry's move to Barrie, where he became successfully involved in the company for the next twenty years. Soon after that, her mother-in-law (our "little Nanny"), sister-in-law Grace and Grace's daughter, Roma, came to live with us.

In 1951, Grace took her mother and daughter to another town, and so we moved to a much smaller house closer to McMaster University. Mom sensed her marriage was in trouble; she took on housekeeping jobs to keep busy and make money. Then my father's position ended, and he decided to pursue more music education by going to Europe, particularly Vienna. Mom helped to finance the trip, so she could see Europe for the first time, and in the summer of 1953 accompanied him as far as London and Paris. She came home by herself with the suspicion he was having a "rendezvous" in Vienna.

Not long after she returned, Mom realized she was pregnant! Abortions were illegal in Ontario at the time, but she was fortunate to convince her doctor that, as a 45-year-old with health problems, she needed one. She didn't tell me about this for years and certainly not the next summer, when I admitted to being pregnant (just before university was to begin). She insisted I get married, refusing to let me think about giving the child up for adoption or to consider an abortion. Insisting that I also complete my university degree at McMaster, she happily agreed to look after my child at home.

Dad was now back, and we all moved to a huge rambling summer house in the idyllic neighbouring village of Ancaster. There was plenty of room for us newlyweds and an adjacent guest house that Dad fantasized turning into a piano studio. A lot of music went on in that studio, but after a year of living with no indoor heating, a skunk family under the main wing, squirrels in the attic and mice everywhere, Mom convinced Dad of the need for a proper house, built right next to the summer house.

Lo and behold – it was built in the summer of 1956! The next two years were busy with Wendy and Bob in high school and Barry and Pat visiting with their two lively boys. We had a basement suite, and Mom loved caring for baby Linda while I finished my BA and started working.

In the spring of 1958, Dad announced he was leaving Mom to move to California to live with Jane, whom he had been seeing for years. It was time for Mom to change her life. My husband and I moved to Toronto, Wendy and Bob were sent away to boarding schools, the Ancaster house was sold, and Mom went to live in Belleville with Grace, whose career was taking her all over Canada and who needed help with care of “Little Nanny” and Roma.

After a year Mom bought another house near McMaster, so Wendy and Bob could attend. Again she took in boarders: first Grace and Roma, then other students and, for a very crowded six months, even me and my family (now with three children)! She travelled with Grace to places like Bermuda and, in 1962, to the Seattle World’s Fair, which she adored.

By 1965, with all her children finally departed, Mom sold her house and spent the next thirteen years moving at least once a year to where she could be of help, either with her various children (and now eight grandchildren), or to her two sisters-in-law and sister (all now living in Barrie). We were scattered all over Canada, and she became the link between us all, traveling from Barrie to Halifax, Montreal, Burlington and Windsor.

In 1965, Dad returned to the Toronto musical scene. This meant he was present at many family occasions, and Mom and he stayed amazingly amicable. She still loved all the music he played, but knew they would never live together again. She obtained a divorce in 1971 and celebrated by renting a large cottage at Wasaga Beach for all the children and grandchildren to visit. We all had a splendid summer that year!

When she found out we were moving to North Vancouver in 1974, she became ecstatic because of her earlier discovery of Seattle. Mom came to visit the following spring and fall. By then my youngest two children were in their teens, and her favourite, Linda, was away at University in Nelson, B.C.

Mom loved everything in North Vancouver, especially going by bus across the Lions Gate Bridge to Stanley Park and downtown, and then coming back to the quiet of our forested streets. She thought the fact that her grandchildren could hop on a bus after school to go skiing up on Grouse Mountain was the best! And she loved ferry trips to Victoria and the Butchart Gardens! Growing up in the lumber mill business, she was awed by the eight-foot-across fir tree stumps hiding in the park behind our house.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t revisit North Vancouver again due to the onset of health complications. However, she kept all of us connected through her many positive letters, as we were going through our own family turmoils. By 1977, she had become quite ill and agreed to go into a nursing home close to Barry and Wendy.

Without her sister Helen or sister-in-law Grace, who had died the previous year, Mom felt quite alone. She had a brief stay in a Toronto hospital in April 1978, and that was my last physical (and very emotional) contact with her. She died in June 1978.

My mother was the center of our family, supporting us and others spiritually, emotionally and financially. I am especially grateful for her help when I was raising my children. The same was true for Barry, Wendy and Bob. We will always cherish these precious memories.