



Wendy Noel's story of

Doris



My mother. She was born in Edmonton in 1929, the youngest of three sisters.

Her name is Doris Elaine (I can't think where these names come from) Gregory. Her father, Len, was a plumber and her mother, Leone, had been a nurse. They met prior to the First World War and decided to hold off marriage until Len came back – "just in case". He came back, they got married and started their family. Len was from England, Belpur, and had come to Canada with many of his 8 siblings.

As a child, my mother was involved in CGIT, not Brownies, "never a Brownie". Her teachers at school were "old boring men who rattled on and on and made class something to be endured". She was very involved socially, on student council and in a choir. She had lots of girlfriends, some of whom she still sees today. Their names seem to be from another time too: Lois, Rita, Bunny, Francis.

My mother doesn't remember a lot about her childhood, although a few memories stand out. She remembers when her mother's oldest sister, her aunt Ina, died when she was five years old. Ina was like a mother figure to my grandmother Leone. When Ina died, Leone left her two oldest daughters at home and took my mother to Ina's farm to attend the funeral. My mother remembers Ina was laid for viewing in a room in the farmhouse. Even though relatives and neighbours tried to dissuade my mother from viewing the corpse, my mother would have none of it. She was determined to see her dead aunt with her mother. The experience of witnessing her mother grieve over her sister was very powerful and my mother said it opened the mystery of life to her in a way that not many five year olds get. She considers it to be "one of the best things that happened to me".

Another memory that stands out for my mother is her own mother's hospitalization when she was about 12. She was in hospital for about 6 months, perhaps longer, for colon trouble. Her mother's illness brought on thoughts about God and heaven and death. She decided if there was a heaven or hell or God, she wouldn't know for sure until she died, so there wasn't much point in worrying about it. If one lived well, and didn't hurt others, one should be okay. And she let the rest of her United Church lessons go. As for being brought up United, she said that although her father had been brought up Anglican and her Mother as a Methodist, she and her sisters were brought up United, as the church was only a block away!

She had thought she was going to go into nursing after high school, but when she discovered they required Grade 13, she opted out and looked around for something else. A friend mentioned X ray to her, and when she found that senior matric was not a requirement, she signed up for training. As soon as she graduated, she was hired as an Xray technician at the Misericordia Hospital in Edmonton.

She fell in love with a man who was Catholic. His nickname was Dip. She knew she could never marry him, for she could never bring her kids up in something she didn't believe in herself. She left for Toronto with a friend, to get over her heartbreak, and to seek work and adventure. She returned after a year and moved to Penticton, where her sister lived. She found work in the local hospital and helped my aunt out with her young family. She met my Dad, Gerald Albert Noel, in a coffee shop and started dating. My Mom said she was never in love with him, but that he 'met all her criteria for a husband'. The criteria was: educated, kind, able to make a good living (my Dad was a geologist), responsible and I guess Not Catholic! Since he met all these and asked her to marry him, she agreed.

They were married March 18, 1955 in Edmonton, and then moved to Whitehorse in the Yukon where my father worked for most of the spring/summer/fall. My mother said there was a great need for her skills there and she was hired immediately and quickly became the head of the X-ray department.

Sex was disappointing for my mother. She and Dad were two innocents and knew little about sex. She recalled a man saying to her, "Just wait until you are married, it is so worth it." After her wedding night Mom's reaction was, "Is that all there is? I don't see what all the fuss is about!" Even if the sex was disappointing, she said, it didn't stop one from getting pregnant. The following year she gave birth to Kevin, my brother.

She lived with my Dad and brother in a mining camp that summer. She said the conditions were rough, and she had to wash diapers in the river, a twenty minute walk away. It was lonely with Dad gone all day, and she was afraid of bears invading the camp. By summer's end, she and Dad moved to Vancouver. He did geological paper work in the winter months and field work all through the good weather months. This meant he was away sometimes six or more months of the year. Mom said his long absences felt like desertion, and she grew to resent raising their children alone.

Gerry and Doris bought their first home in North Vancouver just before I was born in 1957. My sister Alison followed two years later. My Dad, when home, was busy. He got involved in extra stuff like scouts, managing hockey teams, doing church work or curling. Mom and Dad's relationship became distant whatever the season.

My Mother struggled with fatigue most of her child raising years. She would stay up late ironing and watching tv and was unable to get out of bed most mornings. I remember the daily routine of kissing her good bye for school each morning at her bedside. She was diagnosed at some point in my pre-teens with hypoglycemia and was given a diet to work with the fatigue. I think it helped her somewhat, but as chocolate, coffee and alcohol were off limits on this diet and were also part of what made her life worth getting up for, the diet had mixed results. Looking back on it now, it seems obvious that depression played a hand in her fatigue.

My mother made choices about our family life that seemed different from our neighbours in the suburbs of North Van. She sought to provide her children with a diverse education. She enrolled us in Art courses, in drama and music, she joined the Unitarian Church. We belonged to a winter club and took skating, hockey, tennis and synchronized swimming. It made for a busy life for her, shepherding the three of us from one thing to another.

She volunteered for the Vancouver Art Gallery, and was friendly and partied with a lot of our neighbours. But her real love, her real community, she found at the Unitarian Church. She started attending the Church in 1962 with us little ones in tow going to the church school. Her involvement grew to where she was Chair of the North Shore Unitarian Church board for a number of years in the 70's.

It was here she started her journey of self discovery. She began reading the Classics, taking college courses on counseling and community. She opened our home to a family of draft dodgers looking for shelter to find their feet in Canada. She dropped acid. I remember being shocked when she asked my brother and sister and I how we felt about her desire to go on a consciousness raising experience, a guided 'LSD trip'. We were in our teens, and having our own experiences with drugs and were not used to them being anything but illegal and underground. My mother talking about LSD openly felt mind altering. Ultimately, we gave her our blessings and wished her a good trip!

When I was in Grade 10, my mother announced that she wanted out of her marriage. She went into counseling with my Dad, but her heart wasn't into it. She was keen to get out, discover herself in the world, be her own person and not someone's mother, or wife. She wanted to find out who she was and what

else she was meant to do. She moved out just as I graduated from Grade 12 and continued her courses in counseling, leadership and community work.

Her life paralleled mine in a funny way at this time. I was discovering sex and she was rediscovering it; I was making a new life for myself on my own, vulnerable in the world and so was she. She moved in with a man from the Church who 'saw her worth' and the next year found her ideal job as Volunteer Coordinator of the Burnaby Volunteer Centre.

She was a qualified social worker by this time and spent the next few years with Rod (her new fellow) camping, hiking, working, and partying. In the midst of this, she got breast cancer and treated it like it was a little bump to be got over so she could get back to this new life of hers. Then, after a few years together, she and Rod parted and my Mom has been single ever since.

In her mid fifties, she was diagnosed with mixed connective tissue disease and let go of her busy stressful job. She moved into a small house in North Van, which she inherited from a cousin, and still lives there today. My mother has a host of wonderful women friends. She navigated her late 50s and her sixties with these friends, exploring aura massage, dream work, meditation and lots of world travel.

A few years ago, she sustained some brain damage from several mini strokes. It affected her short term memory, and this memory loss seems to have progressed with the years. Today, Mom struggles to remember pretty much anything that has just happened or is about to happen. She doesn't know what day it is anymore, or the month, or the year. She has to ask, and then ask again. And then again. She is no longer driving, as she can't remember how to get to where she wants to go. She is no longer responsible for managing her finances, although this is hard for her to remember, and she still can do a double take when my brother or I open one of her bills in order to pay it. "What are you going through my mail for?" she queries. "I am helping you with your bills now Mom." "Since when?" she challenges.

She no longer lives alone, a woman has been hired to help with the shopping and cooking. Her days are passed reading the paper, playing cards, going for walks and visiting with family and friends that drop by for tea. And if it is after five, a glass of wine will be offered, and offered again. And again.

My mother has always prided herself on her independence, on the different choices she made in her life. Most of these memories are not yet lost, and bring her much joy in the retelling. I am not sure if you have picked up that my mother has a sense of humour. She does. And that is still intact. She is able to find humour in her current situation, and that helps. If you were to ask her how she is doing on any day of the week, she will respond the same, whether it is a good day or a challenging one, "well, I am still here." Her independent spirit lives on.