



Trish Allen's story of

Gladys



Gladys Ina Marie, my mother, was born April 26, 1916 in Sarnia, Ontario to Emile and Emma Burge, their 4th child and 3rd girl. At 18, Emile had emigrated alone from Sweden, courted and won Emma, a 2nd generation Swede from a large family in Bay City, Michigan, who initially shunned him because of his accent. Together they moved to Canada. 'Papa' was a traveling lumber salesman for years; then operated a Shell gas station beside their house.

My mother never learned to speak Swedish because 'Mimi', my grandmother, was determined to stay American – only English was allowed in the house; but Emile retained parts of his heritage, smoking and playing cards with his friends in the office of the garage.

Gladys was 3 years younger than her sister Mid and they became a dynamic duo. They were blonde, pretty and slim. Mid was a leader with Gladys usually content to follow; but once, my mother, who loved to dance, at the age of 14 led all the couples onto the dancefloor with her partner at a cotillion. Unfortunately the boy was Catholic and Mimi didn't approve. Their siblings Roy and Evelyn were older. Roy's wild side was tamed by Madalynne, a well-to-do girl who had 'set her cap' for him. Evelyn, an accomplished musician, married Harold Slater, who worked for the FBI during WWII. They sent their son John Paul to live with Papa and Mimi for the duration. 'Gladie' always thought of him as her kid brother.

Their house seemed huge to me as a child, but as an adult I wondered where they put everyone, especially when my mother's Bay City cousins came, staying a month every summer. Mom told stories of sleeping 3 to a bed like it was natural. Gladys always lacked personal boundaries. The sense of family she developed would become her rock.

There was rarely much money – they made do. Mimi was a tailor, magically crafting new clothes from old, including much of Gladys's University wardrobe. Mom thought she'd be a nurse – so how did she become one of a handful of women at the University of Toronto in 1936? Papa wanted it, so Mimi did everything she could to make it happen.

My mother loved dormitory living, even after her fur coat was stolen. They were actually served at dinner; and the dances! After earning her degree in Home Economics, Gladys went to teacher's college, and then taught in the small town of Schreiber at the Lakehead at a time when few women worked outside the home. It was there she met my father – who did not dance.

My dad, Wilfred Wright Allen, was from a farming family in the Ottawa Valley, the 2nd eldest of 4. Like my mother, 'Wilf' was the first of his family to attend University – Queens. He was a charming, gentle spirit who loved poetry and taught English.

Gladys's strict moral compass went haywire when their principal changed her grades without her consent, passing students she had failed. She won the battle – then quit. Wilf quit. My parents were security conscious people so it amazes me that they were both unemployed on the day they married, far from their families. Fortunately, my father was offered the position of principal in the small Ontario town of Bothwell the day they sailed for Sarnia. He hired my mother.

Gladys taught everything in the early years, but when she could finally choose, she settled on Mathematics. She loved numbers. Gladys preferred teaching the lower grades and eventually refused to teach above Grade 11. She also repeatedly refused to become a Department Head throughout her career.

In 1947, my sister Linda was born. Gladys stayed home with Linda for a few years, but she was an exceptional teacher, and Wilf, the principal, needed her. She went back to work. I was born in 1952. Three years later the pattern repeated.

In 1955, the front page of the London Free Press announced my father's appointment as principal in Wallaceburg at the colossal salary of \$7,000 a year. Once we settled into the big white house with the yard and picket fence, my father's parents moved in to care for me so Mom could teach. Years later I realized how hard that must have been for Gladys. Grandma Allen was a formidable woman. When I started kindergarten, my grandparents moved back to Mountain and Mom hired Mrs. Jenkins who baked wonderful things. In grade school, I became a latchkey kid, but Mom usually got home before me. Linda wanted contact lenses the second they were available, so Mom drove her 50 kilometers to appointments in Port Huron on lunch hours. I suspect that's when she first started driving really fast- which she did into her 80's – unless she wanted your full attention.

Although my father was a workaholic, there were summer vacations and shopping trips into the city – both Toronto and Detroit. Big family trips too. My cousin Diane loved to tease my mother about our trip to John Paul's wedding. I wanted to ride with Diane but my mother wanted me with her – "If we're going to die, we're all going to die together".

In 1965 I entered high school, my sister went to university and my father became an Inspector. A year later, since Wilf was on the road all week, we moved to Sarnia to be near Mimi. But the best laid plans.... Gladys was so busy that summer – moving, grading papers in London, visiting me at camp – that Mimi complained she saw less of her than when we visited weekly. That fall, just as the smoke cleared, Mimi died in her sleep at the age of 84 – having baked pies for the Church Bazaar that day. My mother always felt guilty – and cheated.

Gladys was a popular teacher at her new school, Northern, which I also attended. Life wasn't easy. Both stubborn, we could go for days without speaking. She also regularly taught me an entire semester of math the night before the exam. Mid got us both playing Duplicate Bridge, which helped. Gladie loved her ranchhouse with its sunporch and pool. All summer my parents entertained any and all who dropped by for a swim and a barbeque.

In 1970, Linda married Michael and their first child, Paul was born. My parents were thrilled. I entered Theatre School at the University of Windsor and became a hippie. They were not so thrilled.

My father worked for a year as the Director of Education in Elgin County, still home only on weekends, when. Gladys decided to give up her seniority in Sarnia, rent out the house, and move to St Thomas to be with him. Rules prevented mom from teaching in the same county, so she took a position in nearby London. Clark Road was a much rougher school than Northern.

Again, best laid plans...My father had a heart attack in November, then a second, forcing him to retire. They moved back to Sarnia in 1972, but there were no positions available for my mother. Financial independence was important to Gladys. She decided to stay at Clark Road and do whatever was necessary to qualify for a pension that would satisfy her. For 5 years Gladys tried everything to deal with the 60 mile commute – driving back and forth daily; taking the train daily; renting an apartment. Wilf learned to cook, worked for H&R Block and was there for her. They always saw my shows and spent as much time as possible with their grandchildren, Paul and Kristen.

After mom retired, she began to knit with a passion – amazing sweaters and afghans. My parents also traveled. Dad loved it; mom always said she was happiest at home. Ironically, they won a cruise up the Danube but my father died before they could take the trip. My mother finally went, taking Mid as a companion.

My father had a fatal heart attack at home in the bathroom. It must have been horrible for my mother, but she stayed strong. She was the worst worry-wart I ever met, but when something bad actually happened, she got tough.

After Wilf died, my mother's life became increasingly centred on me and my sister's youngest child, Katherine. And bridge. Her partner was Diane's best friend Betty who became Gladie's best friend as well. She never even considered re-marrying. She seemed to think women who did were weak or hadn't really loved.

Gladys was a very practical woman. Imagination was never her strong suit. She didn't understand my desire to be an actor. She was thrilled when I got my Master's and, ironically, started teaching; but not so happy when I moved to Vancouver in pursuit of work. My mother feared the theatre would be my greatest sorrow; I knew it would be my greatest joy. We were both right.

Linda arranged a party for Gladys at the Sarnia Golf Club for her 80th Birthday. She was so surprised and thrilled, she bought a Social Membership. It became her place- and she was very popular with the staff.

She leaned on her cane more. Stairs grew increasingly difficult, but she got to my sister's cottage in the Muskokas. I flew back to spend time with her Xmas and summers. We talked, visited with her neighbours, went to the Club and played cards. She became increasingly health-conscious so I cooked and froze food. We took several road trips and grew very close.

Gladys lied when convenient, without compunction, and she lied about her health. Her conflicting blood conditions collided in December 2002 when it became apparent her health had been far worse than we had imagined for over 10 years. She said she wanted to have Xmas at home; I came to visit.

The increasingly frequent transfusions weren't working well, her arms were black and blue and Gladys didn't respond to my care as in the past.

On Boxing Day – after Linda left to visit her son in New Jersey – I took my mother to emergency. The doctor was shocked she was still mobile since she had less than 50% of the blood she was supposed to have in her system. They kept her overnight, giving her 4 units. The next day I was told she could die any day. I began to organize her care.

She lived almost 2 months longer.

My mother was always generous with the extended family, so lots of people came to visit when she was dying, including John Paul – all the way from California. She was embarrassed to be bed-ridden and sometimes had to be tricked into seeing people – even her minister. I think she thought it unseemly to be “entertaining” in her bedroom. After the speed of the final transfusion gave her a mini-stroke, her speech became garbled and she lost the ability to write which frustrated her. She had obsessed over her finances and will for weeks – changing things, making what was once clear very confusing. Now she couldn't explain.

For the first few weeks after Gladys accepted she was dying she kept saying she just wanted to get to the end of the month so she could get another pension check. After she accomplished that, despite the stroke, she was heard to say, very clearly, one morning: “Damn, I’m still here.

I wasn’t at the Hospital when my mother died. For the first time, the night before, she was moaning with pain. It was a Sunday and we didn’t have any morphine. I don’t know why we didn’t call an ambulance – perhaps it was because Gladys was so adamant about dying at home. I sat with her until morning when Linda sent me to bed. The home care worker came, the ambulance came, and my sister went to the hospital – all without my really becoming conscious after 2 months of intermittent sleep. Gladys, 86, relaxed and passed away the moment they gave her the shot. She asked for me. I have never gotten past the fact I wasn’t there.