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Life Stories



Summer 2013



Katharine with her sons, Chris and Rob

A Celebration of Life

by Katharine Dalton

In the early morning of Monday, March 25, my son Chris called to tell me that my son Rob was in the hospital and unresponsive. He'd been taken there Sunday night, diagnosed with pneumonia, then had several heart attacks.

Rob suffered from muscular dystrophy; he was diagnosed about 25 years ago and none of us expected he would still be alive.

At the hospital he was put on a life support system to keep his heart pumping and to clear out his lungs, which were full of water. The doctors said that Rob wouldn't last long. It's about a three hour drive from my home to the hospital and I'm no longer able to drive a long distance because of anxiety attacks. Chris said to hold on and he would see what could be worked out to get me up there.

When Chris called me later he said Jessie, Rob's wife, had decided to have the support system turned off at 10:30 that morning. He urged me to call Jessie and ask her to postpone it until I could get there. I couldn't do that: she was his wife and, in this situation, I was the mother-in-law, she had taken care of him all these years, and I thought it was wrong for me to interfere.

This meant that it was impossible for me to get there in time. I sat looking out at the duck pond in my backyard and found it comforting. My friend

Nickey suggested I pretend that Rob was sitting next to me and talk to him, if only in my mind.

Another friend cautioned me that I should not be alone that day, but I knew it was exactly what I should do. So in a sense I spent the day alone with Rob. I didn't need to see him in the hospital. He was there in my heart.

Plans were made for a Celebration of Life event the following Saturday. It turned out that Nickey was planning to see her son in Medford that afternoon and she had time to drive me to the VFW Hall in Methuen where the get-together would take place. I had absolutely no idea what was about to unfold.

First of all, hundreds of people showed up – literally hundreds! Members of the Hell's Angels came on their motorcycles and one guy from the Chieftains (Rob was buddies with the bikers; I'm not sure what their connection was but I don't think it was all good.)

There were people from Lawrence and Methuen whom Rob had known all his life. Many people brought their children; they seemed to have a good time running through the rooms.

My niece Nancy and my brother's step-son Frank both came up from New York. My niece Gina and her husband and daughter came too. Many more relatives than I could count, and many I hadn't seen since I'd moved away from Lawrence, over 50 years ago; most of the younger ones I had never met.

My son Chris would point to some guy and say "That's Clara's son Joey." And I would say, "Who's Clara?"

My nephew Jamie is a very successful tattoo artist with a studio in Seabrook. When he leaned down to kiss me I was afraid I would get hit by one of his piercings; he had three around his nose and two below his lower lip. Fortunately it went without incident.

I couldn't take my eyes off the getups: Women in tight pants, tighter low-cut tops, four-inch heels, and hair dyed magic-marker red, purple or orange.

Men in leather jackets, head bandanas, jeans and t-shirts that spelled out the name of the company they worked for. One biker wore a black t-shirt that on the back spelled out 'Fuck Fear.'

There were a lot of loud shrill voices. These were not young men; most of them had beards, mostly white. Two older men were wearing suits; they really stood out. I still wonder if they maybe came to the wrong Celebration.

Listening to the local accents was fascinating. It was a distinctive pronunciation. (I remember someone once asked me where I grew up. When I told him Lawrence, he said, "You sure don't sound like you came from Lawrence.")

The women called the men boy names like Joey, Frankie, and my son was Robbie. His father was Bob and I didn't want him called Little Bobbie, which was the custom. So we decided to call him Rob.

These friends of Rob had to be in their fifties, (Rob was 58 when he died) but they were still using childhood nicknames. It's like they feel as they did when they were young. Maybe they're on to something!?

The atmosphere was so strong and loving that I realized these people felt very connected. And they cared very much about each other. They shared strong ties to each other that many people in other urban dwellings couldn't even imagine.

One woman at my table said that she was sweating and she had to go out to her car, where she had some deodorant. (Who carries deodorant in their car?) She kept talking about it but never got up. I looked around and saw that nobody at the table was paying attention to her.

Lawrence has been called 'Immigrant City'. When the textile mills were built, the owners brought people over by the boatload and put them up in shabby dwellings. The Italians lived in one area, the Germans in another, the Irish another, and so on.

Working in the mill, for many of them, became their life. Either they didn't know how to find opportunities or there just weren't any for them. My mother was a mender in the mill, but she always thought she was better than that.

After the celebration, my nephew Liam drove me to his house in Somerville where I was to spend the night. My son Chris would come in the morning and drive me back to the Cape. Liam told me when he was young he referred to Somerville as Slum-erville. Now he calls it Slumberville and is very happy there.

His partner, Elliot, was there to greet me and made popovers. Elliot is a cook-from-scratch baker and has a yoga studio nearby.

By now it was early evening. Liam said they were planning to go to a local pub later and asked would I like to join them. I thought about it because they were such an interesting group and I wanted to spend more time with them. But when I learned that they planned to go out at 10:30, I decided to pass. Why so late? I asked. Because nothing gets going until then, Liam said.

Their friend David came by and their friend and tenant, Chris, joined us. We sat around the large kitchen counter enjoying a glass of wine. Liam kept adding to my glass. Then I was offered something called a Moscow Bull, or something like that. Delicious! I felt no effect from all those drinks. That was amazing. I couldn't believe it.

They were a friendly group, telling stories, talking about their friends, making me laugh. Then it hit me: I was going to spend the evening with four gay men. Okay!

It was a most unusual ending to a most special day. I think Rob would have appreciated this ending to his Life Celebration!

Photographs Courtesy of Katharine Dalton



Katharine Dalton moved to Chatham in the early 1980s after 17 years at Arthur D. Little, a management-consulting firm headquartered in Cambridge.

She operated a bookstore in Chatham, Papyrus - Mostly Books, for seven years. She has been chair of the Chatham Public Ceremonies Committee and the Chatham Housing Authority, as well as treasurer of the Chatham Cultural Council. She studied journalism at Cape Cod Community College.

Since 2002 Katharine has worked at the Chatham Senior Center, where she produces a monthly newsletter, helps in the receptionist's office and facilitates a book club. She enjoys reading, writing (but not arithmetic) and spending time with her friends.

