

OPI ARTICLE SUBMISSION: Lessons on Family and Business Life
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Jean Baumgarten passed away February 14, 2020 at 94 years of age in what seemed an act of willpower to hasten her own departure quickly and painlessly to save her family from any potential burden.

Willing things to happen was her way; like a fierce and persistent lioness overseeing her cubs, and all five of her children remained cubs to her. She held her head high as if observing everything from the high plains. From there, she could see all the shenanigans, usually with a glint in her eye, occasionally with a swipe of her paw. Anything and anyone could be stared down and when something was at stake she never flinched.

This was especially true when it came to family and business.

In the 70's she decided one year to drive the gold Cadillac El Dorado with her husband, Hans, trunk packed full of samples and a display booth, to a Chicago tradeshow in winter. Five miles from the convention hall the car broke down in a half foot of snow. Never to be stopped, "let's not cry over spilt milk!" she proclaimed, and they piled all their luggage and samples on flimsy grocery carts like they had seen people do in China. Off they went on a new adventure together.

Together. This is what she loved most; being with Hans to work and play together. The two of them made it up as they went along. That isn't to say it wasn't long hours. It isn't to suggest they weren't occasionally terrified of potential failure from the risks they took together. But it was their game and their gamble and together, as long as they were together, nothing could be bad.

Daughter of a single mother and just a young girl during the Great Depression, Jean knew what it was to lack. In the World War II Nurses Corp., she knew despair. She knew boys who didn't come home. When she met Hans, they were on a double date with other people. Hans knew it right away, that Jean was special and didn't let go of the pursuit until she gave in.

Within six years they had four daughters and no money. Having lived it, she knew what to do to feed her new family. In the early days, adding extra water to powdered milk was not uncommon. Extras were uncommon.

She had vision and knew how to pick or make beautiful things the world hadn't yet seen and knew how to talk them up, write them up, and put them up for sale. All-the-while, not a soul found her to be anything but charming.

In business with her for the last 23 years, she was something else. I'd have meetings with her and Hans, and she'd have me so angry and confused. Later I asked dad, "what's the deal with mom?" Wisely he offered, "Look son, she may not always know what she wants, but she knows what she doesn't want when she hears it and that has been really valuable to us. It would help you to learn to listen her.



For over 20 years I often failed to follow that guidance until Hans passed away. Suddenly, I could hear everything she meant as love, passion and freedom.

Then, over the last two years since Dad's death, each and every Wednesday, Mom and I would get together for an after-work drink. Her favorite was a Campari and mango juice with crushed ice. She confided in me more and more with personal thoughts she had once withheld but for her late husband.

She hated being a burden and wanted to live life on her own terms. She hated seeing the constitution of our great nation being torn apart and worried endlessly that her grandchildren and great grandkids would not have the same opportunities and freedoms that she and her husband helped earn for us all in WWII.

She didn't like talking about herself and her problems, so much so that you'd really have to drag it out of her.

A telling moment that embodies her caring, loving and comforting of others is this;

A week ago today she had a stroke. Brain and body half paralyzed she couldn't see very well without her glasses; could barely hear; and her right side was immobile. Her expression was mostly vacant, but an occasional smile would try to pierce through the confusion on her brow.

At her bedside I put my distraught face near hers. With her left hand she reached up to my head and pulled me close. She was attempting to speak but nothing was coming out. She did this over and over, as if to tell me a dozen long lost tales. Finally, she took a deep breath, pulling my worried face nearer, smiled and whispered to me one last time, "it's okay" ...comforting others 'til the end.

Whatever suffering there may have been in her own life was solved by her focus on making life better for others mainly through the many ways she contributed to her expansive family and our customers. From early on nothing was a given, not the shoes on her feet or the shirt off her back, but if it mattered to you, she'd have given that, too.

While she was rarely front-page news and didn't care for the spotlight, she adored her many industry friends, most of whom she was sad to have outlived, and relished in everyone's generosity over more than 60 years.

To those who remember her as a businesswoman, colleague and friend, thank you for all your consideration, love and respect for my remarkable mother over these many decades.

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