

## Pauline Degenfelder

Good morning. I am Eric Degenfelder, Pauline's older son. With me today are my wife Jennifer and my son Eric Jr and Cecelia, CC for short. They called my mom "Mimi".

Over the past two weeks I have been thinking about my memories: the impressions, the experiences, the stories, the essence, the key characteristics that made my mom special to me and you. I will start with some comments I received in messages received from my family and friends when they heard of her death:

- "She was amazing!"
- "She was indeed a classy lady"
- "Your Mom was an extraordinary person who had a profound and very positive impact"
- "She was a remarkable woman"

Pauline grew up in Queens New York where she attended Mary Louis Academy and was valedictorian. That was the beginning of a long record of educational achievements. She received her degree in English at Cornell where she was President of her sorority. She met my dad at Cornell, and after a couple touch and go situations, they found their future in each other and were married for over 60 years. If you know both my mom and dad, you could see the Ying and Yang at work in their relationship. Their strengths COMPLEMENTED each other and they SUPPORTED each other through all the years, challenges and successes.

Later on, my mom got her Masters of English at University of Houston. After moving from Texas to Delaware and then Delaware to Mentor, Ohio, she achieved her PhD in English from Case Western and later on her MBA from Case Western. She was proud of these achievements – When my new friends in Shaker Heights first came to our house, they said "Hi Mrs. Degenfelder, very nice to meet you." She replied in a somewhat cool tone, "It's DOCTOR Degenfelder."

Pauline had an OUTSTANDING CAREER that began at a time in the 1970s when women were making advances in the professional workforce. It started in education and later transitioned to health care leadership. She taught at two high schools in Maryland and Texas, then Lake Erie College, Lakeland College, Fitchburg State, and then finally she became the director of English for the Worcester, Mass school system. Her health care career started with our move back to Ohio, beginning at Kaiser and increasing levels of responsibility at MetroHealth, Cigna in Hartford (where the rumor is she got Curt her first job), and Coventry Health in Pittsburgh.

I really valued my mom's business and people advice as my own career progressed. We often talked about management / CEO type challenges and opportunities. Her business acumen remained sharp, into this fall of 2023. On one of my last visits, I was sitting by her bed while

she was resting. Suddenly having something important on her mind, she motioned for me to move close so I could hear. I was wondering what the critical information was? With her direct gaze and a whispered voice, she said “How’s the acquisition?” The point of that story is: She was a fantastic ROLE MODEL for Curt, me, and many others. And she took great interest in pride in whatever we were working on or attacking next.

The family and my parents loved to travel and we took a lot of trips. We had cross country car adventures east and west and north and south. My mom and dad had many great international trips to Italy, Mexico, Columbia, Russia, multiple times to China, Croatia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Egypt, and Germany. On a business trip to Japan, my dad brought along my mom but failed to tell the Japanese hosts, which as you may is a major protocol error especially in that culture. After asking “Now who is this woman with you?”, the Japanese quickly grew to admire my mom’s professional knowledge, poise and style.

My mom LOVED the arts, music, and culture. Her support of Cornell, the Cleveland Boys & Girls Club, and the Cleveland Museum of Art was extensive. If you saw our lifestyle when we lived in Massachusetts, it had some parallels to the show “Green Acres.” Joe, Eric and Curt reveling in the outdoors, woods, farming, fires, lake, and hiking adventures. Pauline craving the city life and looking for ways to get some culture into the family. She would enroll Curtis and me in all kinds of classes and camps to expose us to the finer things. One camp involved beekeeping, wood carving, and loom weaving. Boy Scouts was a good compromise that we both enjoyed. She would also take us to all kinds of movies, shows, plays, and into Boston and Cleveland. That included the Cleveland Orchestra, and the Cleveland Museum of Art – where of course our favorite exhibit was the suits of armor. What young kids get exposed to groundbreaking movies such as the Australian “Walkabout”, Charlie Chaplin’s “The Gold Rush”, “2001 a Space Odessey”. Or even better “Urban Cowboy” at the drive through theater where Curtis and I were supposed be asleep in the back of the station wagon, but were secretly watching all of the action!

My mom also instilled in us independence and adaptability. While she and my dad were working full time, the responsibility for laundry, cooking, and shopping was left to Curt and me. I learned to cook SpaghettiOs on the stove at age 10. People would give interested looks as we wheeled the giant garden way cart up Warrensville Center Road full of groceries from the Van Aken shopping center. One evening we were enjoying a dinner that Curt and I had prepared earlier that day. As my mom was cutting into the fish, she noticed a rather tough skin on the bottom. I turns out that we had baked and served it with the cardboard tray and liner still attached on the bottom!

So, what has Pauline passed on to Curtis, me, her grandchildren and many others she touched throughout her life? I am sure you would recognize:

- Discipline
- Style
- Culture
- Poise
- A passion for learning
- Love of people
- Deep character
- And of course: Stand up straight and Sit up straight!

One more story to give you a complete picture from my perspective. I was in the beginning of 9<sup>th</sup> grade at Byron school after moving to Shaker from Massachusetts six months earlier. I was really struggling in the advanced math class, and was going for lots of extra help after school. My mom also made several visits to the school that semester to check on my progress. After one such meeting, the next day my math teacher stopped me after class to give me some positive comments and encouragement, summing it up with "Your mom really seems nice!". I looked him directly in the eye, paused for a moment and said seriously: "she SEEMS nice.....". That was the standing joke between me and my mom for the last 45 years.

But the point is: She WAS NICE, an excellent listener, caring, knowing when to push and when to support. Giving it her all whether it be to the family, work, or school. With a complete dedication and concern to her family, and a positive impact on everyone she met.

Her legacy lives on in us. We Love You Mom and We Miss You.