

In Memoriam
Roberta Ann Holden
August 6, 1929 - August 2, 2009

My mother's life is a testament to the power of faith, perseverance, and love in the face of suffering.

She was born in Ponchatoula, on the shore of Lake Ponchartrain, and baptized in St. Louis Cathedral in New Orleans. She grew up in a farmhouse in the country, a big house with a porch that wrapped all the way around it.

When I asked her what her earliest memory was, she told me that it was going out to the train tracks to say goodbye to her father, who was being taken to prison. Her father, William Yit Son Lau, was born in Hawaii. His parents were from China. I don't know why he was imprisoned but I believe he was caught up in the rum running trade with Cuba and trying to make money during the Depression, as so many were.

My mother also remembered being taken to Mardi Gras by her Aunts Irene, Louise, and Thelma, and sitting in the rumble seat of a car, receiving necklaces thrown by those in the parades.

Her own mother tried to raise the children alone for a while, working as a waitress, but she was singularly unsuited to this task. Young Roberta sometimes was called upon to make dinner for the family.

Eventually her mother put her three children (Roberta, the oldest; her sister Willamae and her brother Harold) in an orphanage on Napoleon Street in New Orleans and went to Chicago to live with Joe Minneci. At the time, Roberta was about seven years old. She remembered her brother crying incessantly. He was in the boys' area, separated from his sisters.

My mother remembered how kind the nuns were. She and her brother and sister would receive gifts from their mother that they could never use—things like silk gloves you might wear at a formal ball, for instance. Eventually the nuns realized that my grandmother was able to support her children, and one was sent to Chicago to bring her back. The children went to live in the city, on Wrightwood Avenue, where their mother worked as a masseuse, steaming towels in the front parlor of the home.

My mother spoke very fondly of growing up in Chicago. As a



Roberta is in the middle.

teenager, a bobby-soxer, she would run around with her girlfriends from St. Sebastian's High School, or sometimes to the Aragon Ballroom, where they would dance with servicemen. My mother was often picked last for dances because she looked dark, oriental, and different. In later years she would show us some of the dances she did. She remembered them all, and the names of some of the men she danced with, and all her friends' names. She loved novelty songs like "Mairzy Doats" and "The Hucklebuck." And as we all know, she would sing the Chiquita Banana song to anyone who asked, at the drop of a hat. She once sang this into my office answering machine, at my request, on my birthday, to the amusement of my coworkers:

*"I'm Chiquita Banana and I'm here to say
Bananas have to ripen in a special way
When they're flecked with brown and have a golden hue
Bananas taste the best and are the best for you..."*

To this day, when I have a banana, I look for ones with brown spots, and I think of that song.



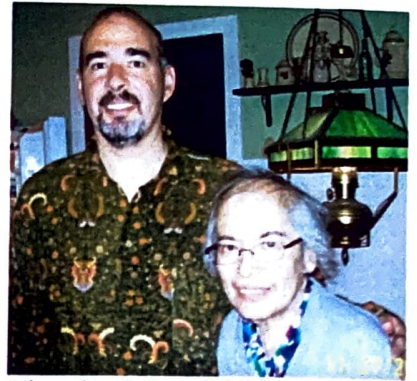
Mom also must have seen lots of movies in the 40s and early 50s because her love of *Casablanca* and stars like Gregory Peck (from whom she took my name) stayed with her all her life.

She met my father while she was living at the Eleanor Club, a house for women on the Near North Side. She was taking secretarial classes and Dad was in business school. They married in 1956, in Evanston, honeymooned in the Smoky

Mountains, and I was born almost exactly nine months later.

After a short time in Evanston we moved to Des Plaines, to the house on Orchard Street where mom would live for the next 50 years. When my father was looking for work in the 60s, it was Mom who found the ad for a mechanic at United Airlines. Dad worked there until he retired. We took many trips to Hawaii and other places. Mom didn't always go; she never liked camping or trailer life. When Dad worked the evening shift, it was Mom who coped with the three of us after school and in the evenings. I was not always the easiest of teenagers to be around. I regret that I often got angry at what felt like her over-involvement in our lives and in anything we did—when in truth, as I now see with the clarity of hindsight— my mother simply didn't think of herself at all, but devoted nearly all of her thoughts to her children and others.

She drove us anywhere whenever we asked, and always gave us money when we asked —whatever she had. Rummaging through her messy purse was a common ritual for all of us, I am sure. My friends and I remember her driving us to school or other events. She would back up, not turning around, barely able to see through the fogged up windows. Driving with her was always an adventure. But we never got in an accident.



Thanksgiving 2008

She made excellent spaghetti, date bars, and the best potato salad I ever had.

The physical challenges of the last half of my mother's life are hard to recount. Once a stenographer who could type 100 words a minute, she became disabled by rheumatoid arthritis, which never loosened its grip on her—only tightening, year after year, as pain became a constant companion. She lost her hair and had to wear wigs—very bad wigs—for a while. When she could no longer work, she and her sister, my Aunt Willamae, took up a career as antique dealers, scouring estate sales and selling their finds at flea markets. They were inseparable. All the money my mother made, she spent on her children, or she gave to us whenever we asked. She had no indulgences, no bad habits. She gave up smoking. I only remember her drinking highballs a few times when we were young and at a family party.

Gradually, the joys of her life were reduced. We moved away—though not too far, and with grandchildren to visit her. She had two knee replacements. When walking became difficult, going to garage sales became less frequent. When her sister died, that was a hard blow. Her last six months were the worst, physically. But even while worrying and fretting about problems both real and imagined, she would always stop to say she loved you. Even in the middle of saying she had to go to the bathroom or thinking she was falling—when in fact she was in a bed that she would never leave—you could stop her by saying, "Mom, guess what?"

"What?" she would say.

"I love you." Her worries would stop for a moment, her face would light up and she would say, "I love you too, very much." These were in fact the last words I heard her speak to me.

Although she could barely open her eyes that last visit, the day before she died, she looked at her granddaughters and said how pretty they were, and listened to the clips from their recitals that I insisted on playing for her. In the face of pain and suffering, love endures. That is one of the best things my mother taught me, and because this lesson was so hard-won and yet so strong and genuine, it is a gift I will carry with me every day.

Greg Holden Aug. 4, 2009