

## Colleen Cason: Remembering a mother of note

By Colleen Cason

Saturday, May 11, 2013

If the rhythm of life goes according to plan, there is something every mother might want to remember.

The kids probably will get the last word. It falls on them to write mom's obituary or deliver her eulogy.

Some of these tributes sound so refreshingly honest, they seem to be improvised in the key of laughter. The obituary of Antonia W. "Toni" Larroux, of Bay St. Louis, Miss., recently made the rounds on the Internet after her children observed about her: "Waffle House lost a loyal customer on April 30, 2013." It concluded: "Anyone wearing black will not be admitted to the memorial. She is not dead. She is alive."

They did their dear old mum the courtesy of honoring her with honesty, overdue library books and all.

And you could hear both violins and kazoos in the obituary in this newspaper to Janet Frances Lyon Ballinger. The 77-year-old retired teacher died March 26 in her Camarillo home of 40 years.

She valued culture and refinement, but inner toughness came from her upbringing in the High Plains oil patch.

"I always said if the Armageddon does manifest, only two things would be left on Earth: Mom and the cockroaches," said her daughter Jaimie Goulding

Ballinger is survived by hundreds of children: Goulding and her brother Steve, grandchildren, nieces and nephews and the students she taught in the Pleasant Valley School District for more than 30 years.

"Her very DNA was being a teacher," Goulding told me. "Her purpose was to teach and mold."

Mrs. Ballinger worked in every school in the district and trumpeted the value of education at every opportunity. You might call people with four academic degrees a professional student. She would call them lifelong learners. She looked after every

detail of her children's education. Son Steve earned a full-ride scholarship to Stanford and now is a doctor with an orthopedic practice in Oregon. Jaimie holds a degree in chemistry, has worked in biotech and now is employed at a Simi Valley firm that builds instruments to test air quality.

Their mom believed the greatest teaching aid of all was anything that let music escape into the atmosphere. It was a given to her that children must be raised around instruments they can bang or blow.

When Jaimie and Steve were put down for their nap, their mom played tunes on the piano.

"She favored French Impressionist composers, dreamy versions of 'Clair de Lune,' that kind of stuff," Goulding noted.

On road trips, the mandatory "are we there yet?" were answered with an invitation to join her in a rendition of "Moon River."

Music was Ballinger's antidote to most everything that vexed the human spirit, most especially the Santa Anas. She dropped a record on the phonograph to quiet her students, rankled by the devil winds.

And music held power over grief. Her husband, Fred, died of cancer at age 58 in 1990, after a career at the Santa Susana Field Laboratory.

She became active in the ChannelAire Chorus, an ensemble of women who belt out traditional barbershop melodies. She sang with the group until about seven years ago, when she was too weak from arthritis to stand on the risers.

As joints gave way and needed to be replaced, she lost a step but never her mobility. Somehow, she managed to cheat gravity and continue to do for others.

Eventually, cancer sounded the death knell. Jaimie and her cousin Carol Bjordahl — the daughter of Ballinger's twin sister — kept a vigil at her bedside.

She would not let go. The hospice nurse told Jaimie that some people do not depart under a watchful eye. So they left the room. Ballinger died three minutes later.

She never wanted a fuss, so a funeral was so out of the question. She asked that contributions be made to Save Our Kids Music, an inspiring grass-roots effort by parents to keep music education in the Pleasant Valley School District.

She likely would have been pleased to know on the morning of her passing, son Steve wrote a poem; part of it goes like this: "Waking to the aroma of good strong coffee And the sound of happy humming: That is what home means to me. ... You taught me how to hum And brew good strong coffee And build a happy home inside me. So home is

never far away And neither are you.”

Now, I call that singing Mom’s praises.

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