

Ethel Rae McInnes

(Nee Cootes)

19/2/1932- 14/3/2016

The day Mum died was a glorious autumn day with a vivid blue sky and a warm sun that enticed you to stay outdoors. It is great comfort to know that Mum had been in her garden, picking tomatoes in the morning to be taken by her niece Jocelyn to her sister Jan in Melbourne; feeding the silverbeet and clearing a path to her magnificent dahlias that were destined for this church at Easter. She had gone in to rest and died in her sleep in Dad's recliner chair, in almost the same position that Dad had died in, 5 years ago. The next day I woke at dawn to see an overcast sky and a soft rain. And I thought how perfect that was. It heralded a quieter day, a day for her garden to settle, and a day of reflection and contemplation for me and my family. Our world had changed – mum was such a big part of our lives.

As most of you here today would know, my mother loved gardening. But it was only one of her passions.

Born in Bombala, Mum grew up with a lively and loving extended family. While there was a 6 year age gap between Mum and her sister Jan and 12 years between Mum and her brother Bertie (later known as Ted), Mum was always close to them, and there was no shortage of cousins and young aunts and uncles to fill the gaps in between. Her father had been a baker, and while this may have been her source for another of her passions, cooking, she came from a stock of impressive bakers on all sides. When her father began to work for his father in-law's sawmill the extended family stayed close. When she was 11 they moved to the Blue Mountains to work new mills and her **home** in Kurrajong Heights included chickens, pigs, dogs, cows, an apple orchard, a huge vegetable garden and of course, a cottage garden of abundant roses and hydrangeas. The huge wood-burning range in the kitchen rarely went out, and with constant visitors and contributions to the Church, CWA and local community, Mum had a happy childhood and wonderful home life from which sprang her love of gardening, cooking, outdoor activities, knitting, reading - and talking. As you will no doubt know, Mum was always up for a chat – and if you had the time to stop and listen to one of her stories, as convoluted and unending as they often were, she would have loved you for it.

Mum went to Parramatta High in Sydney for matriculation, and on to Balmain Teachers College, boarding during the week days from an early age with relatives or friends. From college Mum took up her first post at Ainslie Primary School, here in Canberra, in 1951. We might admire her gardening and cooking, but she was a passionate and dedicated teacher for 40 years, in fact, she never stopped being one, and was still tutoring at age 82. As primary teachers know, you have to be multitalented and while Mum always deplored her lack of musical ability, it never stopped her enjoying singing or dancing and in aiming high in developing her class's theatrical productions. She invited to one school performance a young man from the hostel she was living at. The next day, she was called into the Headmaster's office, and, typically for Mum, she wondered "what have I done wrong, now? The headmaster began the conversation dauntingly with the words "Have you got something to tell me, Ethel?" which really had Mum shaking in her shoes. But he went on to say that, having seen how Mum's eyes kept straying to that young man near the front of the stage, and that *he* hadn't taken his eyes off her, he thought Mum might like him to tear up the recently acquired transfer back in Sydney. The rest, as they say, is history and Mum and Dad were married on July 25, 1953.

Some say opposites attract, and in many ways my father was the opposite of Mum. Her large, gregarious family, at times 20 -30 if not more all gathered together, was quite different to his family life in Brisbane. Mum and Dad bought one of the new monocrete houses here in O'Conner, where they both lived for the rest of their lives. Mum talked of collecting sheep manure at the end of the street – she had a new garden to establish after all. Dad always did the mowing and much of the hard landscaping, but Mum was pretty impressive at wielding a mattock and he soon learnt to stand clear. He also learnt that the garden was a magnet for Mum. Arriving home from school in the afternoon she would very often not make it to the door without "just doing something" first in the garden. Beautiful shoes, another of her passions, were sacrificed to Mother Earth as Mum stepped on to damp soil to pull out a weed or to turn on the sprinkler, which just happened to be a bit closer than she thought. Also planted in the garden, but never to sprout are many, many sets of car keys that fell from the tap or from the top of a garden stake. We would be sent outside with a torch to search for them, but there was often panic in our household on school mornings with everybody looking for keys that were never found.

Mum loved the street and the neighbours, and I think how lucky it is, in this day and age, for Mum to have known her neighbours for so long. Conversations took place on the footpath by someone's letterbox. The front garden was often the place where Mum met new people. She had many stories to tell of people she talked to - such as the unknown child that she found one morning happily picking flowers to

take to her teacher, but she was a little less accommodating when she found a woman just helping herself. If only that woman had knocked on the door, she may well have gone with an armload of flowers *and* a big bag of tomatoes.

Mum and Dad lived full lives, entertaining and being involved in community work in this newly developing city of Canberra. She looked sensational when she went out, wearing beautiful outfits, many made by her talented mother, and Dad was always proud to have her on his arm. When Dad joined the Masonic Lodge, Mum joined a women's equivalent, and they both held important roles such as treasurer or secretary and were always involved in raising money for charities and giving service - living a life that clearly expressed their values. We had many functions at our house as part of progressive dinners and afternoon teas and if not to raise money it was part of Mum's school collegiality. She was a great cook and enjoyed baking cakes and slices, but quite often three little children had to watch them be put on platters for someone else to enjoy. Of course, we rarely missed out - it might have been the misshapen sponge that we got, but it tasted great just the same. My Mum was a never a paragon though - disasters did occur, and I have a vivid memory of hearing the devastating comment by a guest that he had found his raw eggs for dessert a new experience - Mum had forgotten to put the sugar in the Italian dessert, zabaglione. I think she knew her eyes were starting to fade when she put sugar instead of salt on the pork crackling and a cup of cooking salt instead of a cup of sugar in the cupcakes. She was also an incredibly messy cook. She decorated the kitchen and herself as well as the cake and I sometimes think her old kitchen cupboards are only being held together by dollops of jam. But please don't worry if you are concerned about any recently acquired jams or baked goods from Mum. Her three children all survived and thrived.

Mum was a cancer survivor and her being diagnosed with Bowel cancer at 43 years of age was a shock to us all. Her family rallied around of course, with Jan leaving her 4 children, to help my family. Mum's family was always there if there was ever a need.

Mum was good fun as a mother. She played endless boardgames, card games, badminton and just about everything else with us as well as spending many hours on the beach. Mum and Dad bought a block of land at Broulee in 1963. This of course, provided Mum with another garden, but she also enjoyed cooking the fish Dad caught for dinner or collecting oysters or abalone herself. This was not without its dangers - for us I mean. Collecting abalone on Broulee Island - when it was an island - and you were allowed to collect shellfish, Mum miss-timed the high tide one day and I have a strong young stranger to thank for rescuing me as I got swept

off the narrow sandbar. Mum was struggling with a few other kids around her neck and was only going to let go of that big bag of abalone if she *really* had to. At Broulee visitors gathered, particularly once her parents and her brother and his family moved to the village and Mum had more opportunity to see her sister more frequently as well as many other relatives. I know she valued Pam's friendship, which grew closer after her brother's death some years ago. There were endless BBQs and nights of quite competitive euchre and 500 which Mum loved playing. We all hoped it would not be our card play that lost the game, or we would be in for a mini lecture – but Mum was only really teaching us how to play better.

Mum travelled to China with Ted and Pam and had also visited Japan with neighbours, but I think she enjoyed travelling to parts of Australia even more. She often did this following a hockey team, first with Dad and then with all three children. She looked like a hefty Russian lady from Siberia with all the layers she would add as she watched yet another carnival in the bitter winter winds of Crookwell or Tasmania, but despite the gloves and the blanket thrown over her shoulders, she also managed to knit while she cheered. Mum has knitted us together as a family. No television program was ever watched without the additional sound effect of clicking needles – in fact, her knitting was a good barometer of how exciting the show was – she could knit fast when she got going, and on occasion did knit a sleeve twice as long as it should have been. Knitting patterns were like recipes to Mum. She collected them obsessively. At her home on her last day, there, beside her chair was a half finished cardigan for me and baby jacket for the soon to arrive grand niece or nephew. There too, were the usual suduko and word puzzles and a novel. Mum always did 5 things at once. There were also recipes cut from a magazine ready for pasting into a book. Even her purchased cook books are full of pasted recipes – she thought the pictures wasted space. Beside the recipes on the table there was also, of course, her treasured plant nursery brochures and lists of plants desired.

Mum was not a purist when it came to the garden - a plant from anywhere could find its home there. It was the same with people. She was open-hearted and interested and there are few people she met whom she did not have something good to say about. She has loved the years she has spent here as part of the St Philips parish. Having looked after Dad for 10 hard, long years following his stroke, many of the activities she thought she would do once retired were curtailed, but she found here a warm and welcoming community. As Colin our organist here today said, for years you only saw her occasionally, and then suddenly she was everywhere. That was Mum – she never did anything by halves. I hope you know how much she has appreciated you all and has enjoyed getting to know you.

She loved all three of her children very much – we all have many stories to tell of how she made us laugh or made us shake our heads. Our house was often chaotic with every surface buried under one thing or another, and many times she left us stranded, the last person standing on an oval or street, her head too full of ideas to remember that she had promised to pick us up. You have no idea how much we needed mobile phones growing up with mum but we were a generation too early. Her first born, Greg would always hold a special place in her heart, and she has loved Greg's retirement years as he became her unofficial chauffeur and personal assistant – what more could she want? - and they spent many loving hours together. She looked forward every week to her Pizza from Colin on Tuesdays and watching football with him on Friday nights – he is so like Dad in his no-nonsense approach to life, his reliability and his sporting skills, I am sure she called him Merv at times. In fact, we all learnt to respond to any name, as she rarely got it right, even with her children. I was perhaps the more prickly one, but Mum nurtured me like she would any difficult plant in her garden, supporting me in whatever direction I chose to grow. When I returned to Canberra, became a mother and a teacher, Mum and I forged a very close bond as we shared a passion for my boys, Sebastian and Zac, and for education.

Although Mum had to resign from teaching when Greg was born in 1954, as you had to in those days, she soon went back to teaching. She dedicated herself to the schools she taught at: Ainslie, Turner, Lyneham for 10 years and Forrest Primary for 19. Although I may have emphasised her rather ad-hoc nature, she was a talented teacher and always had our utmost respect. At one time or another, Mum, in addition to her classroom teaching, was in charge of the school-wide sport program, ran an infant's school library, was the school co-ordinator of mathematics, and of science and technology, and was heavily involved in English curriculum development. She wrote policies regarding student welfare and behaviour and, as a tolerant and kind teacher, had strong views on appropriate discipline. While she acted as deputy on occasions, Mum was never really interested in climbing a career ladder – I think she enjoyed being in the classroom with the children too much. She planned and led many excursions and camps (which she loved), attended many courses and professional development workshops, and built up a mountain of resources for her classroom, believing in experiential learning. She covered the house with her school preparations, creating her own booklets, making models and designing posters, and when Dad could not find the hammer or some other tool, he knew exactly where it was, at school. I think his most valued gift to her was a staple gun -the school didn't stand a chance – it was going to be decorated. Dad got alarmed at times when he heard her planning such things as having her 5th graders

create hot air balloons to launch on the school oval, or when she was teaching about electricity. She was very adventurous in her lesson planning and he did what he could to keep everyone safe. But I think there are a few stories my brother Colin could tell, which he didn't know about - Mum never turned a powerpoint off when disconnecting appliances such as the jug or frypan and you had to be on your guard when you approached the metal sink. When a friend phoned one night to tell her Lyneham Primary was ablaze, she didn't hesitate, jumping in the car, probably with just a coat over her nightie, to see what she could rescue. I can't remember if Dad made it into the car to provide some restraint, but I do remember sifting through the ashes of her classroom the following day to collect what we could and those smoky resources and charred books were used for many years following the fire. She loved teaching about Australia – the gold rush and the early explorers were among her favourite topics, but over-arching all was a real desire to help children learn. She introduced many new programs and methodologies into the schools she taught at. She used Lego and all types of games to teach mathematical concepts, and was one of the first teachers in Canberra to use a computer. Under her leadership, computers were introduced to every classroom at Forrest Primary, even if it was a case of the blind leading the blind at times. (Mum, in reality, struggled to turn the television on and could easily undo hours of a careful setup because she just madly pushed all the buttons – Colin and Greg knew what they were in for when her home system ended up with 3 remotes and one was double sided). Mum was determined to find ways computers would benefit children, and she had hours of fun playing the maths games too. It is somewhat surprising that in her retirement she refused all offers to buy her a laptop and didn't use a computer at home – I really think she didn't want anything tempting her away from her gardening, cooking, and reading.

When her grandchildren started school, she was there too - running reading groups, helping with craft, attending excursions and giving private tutoring to some needy ones. Mum never missed one of their school performances and, as you can imagine, was soon known for her contributions to the school fair plant stall. She relished every opportunity to be with her grandchildren, and I don't know if it is more accurate to describe her home as an exciting school room, an adventure playground, or gingerbread house full of treats – it was all those things, and always full of hugs and laughter.

How do you sum up the contribution your mother makes to your life? As my mentor, giving sound advice on raising kids and on teaching them, I could not have had a more caring, knowledgeable or passionately interested person to share long discussions with. As a mother, she was always there for us, exuberant, warm

hearted, loving and so very very generous. Of course she drove us crazy at times – she never did anything the way *we* would do it, but she never thought herself to be perfect, or expected it of anyone else, and I think that “realness” is what I loved most about mum – she showed that your life can be rich, happy and satisfying, no matter what you choose to do or what the fates have in store for you, if you are true to yourself.