



Constance Ann Wood (1933 to 2012)

My mom lived life awake, passionate, and involved; she made a difference in her community, her family, and in the world. She understood that we all have a responsibility to get involved and she took that challenge to task almost every single day of her life. The causes to which she provided focus and those individuals within the community whom she volunteered her services to and with, were made more rich through her sincerity and her contributions. And we (Amy, Andy, Dad, and I) were ultimately the most fortunate to have her in our family.

Connie was born in 1933 in Kalamazoo. Grandma (Anne Hutchins) and Grandpa (Eugene Hutchins) raised three kids (Gene, Mom, and Suzie) beginning in the Depression, through the War, and with Suzie into the Sixties. They bounced around between the North End, Washington Square, and Milwood; they experienced Kalamazoo in the old days back when Gilmores Department Store ruled the mall and classic movie theatres dotted the city. Her memories of growing up with her mom and dad and Uncle Gene (Suzie was almost sixteen years younger) were fond; life was a black and white movie reel in a simpler time. For mom, it really was a Wonderful Life.

Mom went to Kalamazoo Central High School (c/o 1951). Dad attended State High (c/o 1949). They met through Dad's dad at Ingersoll's where Mom was a secretary, while Dad was home on leave from his four-year tour in the Air Force. They were married in 1954, and when dad got out they began a family in West Michigan. Me and Amy and Andy were fortunate to live in an era so uncomplicated compared to how kids grow up today; and almost all of it at one place - 2829 Fulford Street in Kalamazoo.

Mom and Dad provided structure and love and security; our fridge was always full, our folks went to our little league games *and* to parent teacher conferences. Lunch was at noon; a bowl of Campbell's tomato soup, a sandwich cut diagonally, pickles, chips, and a big fat glass of milk. Dinner was at 5:00 PM. You better be on time – and nobody left the table 'til everyone was finished. TV had two channels; ours was black n white with no cable. Life was good. It was mom's goal to make our home a sanctuary of creativity and warmth. She did it all...washed clothes by hand, ran 'em through the ringer, hung 'em outside on the line in the summer and in the basement come wintertime. She was the absolute best casserole cooker in the world; chili and goulash and stuffed peppers – she was still cranking them out as good as ever into her late seventies. She was our unofficial at-home art teacher especially when holidays popped up. Every October she was working on some fantastically creative homemade Halloween costume; I was a walking tree, Amy a walking pumpkin and a homeless hobo, and Andy a very scary Dracula. She helped us make our own Charley Brown Valentines Day cards for all of our schoolmates and required us to send homemade "Thank you's" after we got birthday gifts. She guided us well; but never *did it* for us.

Meanwhile she found time to begin a life of service. Mom taught art at Kalamazoo City Hall on Tuesday nights; ceramics and tiles and at Christmas big beautiful pinecone wreaths. Pinecones and acorns and red ribbon littered the basement floor all through the holiday season. The wreaths were as elegant as they were strong. It took hard work. She made dozens to give away to neighbors and friends and their moms and dads. Every one of our elementary school teachers got one of those babies. It helped with the grades.

As we got older mom's role changed; she turned into a taxi service for summer recreation softball and little league games. No photos, no video tapes, no AYBT Midwest travel teams; it was a neighborhood thing. Dad coached nine years in Milwood Little League. Mom worked concessions around the clock and still got to every single ballgame. Our home was a beehive; an intersection for all sorts of kids. Our fridge was their fridge. Our

pool was theirs. Lunch was still at noon and dinner at 5:00...only often we pulled up extra chairs. Out and about and on the move, bicycles buzzed all over 2829 Fulford Street. Each of our friends...Amy's and Andy's and mine - knew absolutely that my mother cared about their well-being, that she would feed them, visit with them, listen to their stories, and put band aids on their scrapes and bruises. Because of the inclusive nature of my folks – my dad, through years of Little League coaching guidance – my mom because her heart was open to anybody who we brought through the doors – our family, in those junior high and high school years, extended, particularly during the summer months into kind of a village clan. You would always find a welcome mat and an open heart at the Wood house.

Meanwhile, Mom's awareness of the world "outside of our family" evolved.

It's difficult to say exactly when she awakened to the problems of the world. In a different life, in a different time Connie would've been a nurse. She lived in an era where girls grew up to be mothers. She relished that responsibility, but always had a spirit that needed to give to the world in a larger sense. She said frequently she would've loved to have earned a college degree, serve in a hospital, and to have a career as a travel nurse. Her favorite job she ever had was a twelve-year run in the 1980's with Bronson Hospital at Urology Midwest. An office assistant by trade, she studied medical terminology like she was cramming for finals – just to be more competent in the workplace. In all conversations with anybody that involved medicine, right up until she passed, she offered every single Wikipedia medical detail, without the benefit of the Wikipedia or the Internet. Sometimes the lectures were a bit exhausting, but it was always impressive the energy she put into them. Through these last few months in and out of hospitals and nursing homes and doctor's offices Mom was grateful and impressed with the care of the nurses who she came to depend upon. To see so many women, so thoroughly involved in the health care field in such a significant manner, I know it made her wholly content as a patient, and so thoroughly proud as a woman.

Andy and Amy and I grew up. Holidays were still a treat and home was always home. As American Christmas evolved into a commercial extravaganza our Thanksgivings at Fulford Street and out at Gilkey Lake became our favorite family time. Mom and Dad always continued to open their home for anybody we brought by. Outside in the yard, together they sculpted gardens worthy of the National Arboretum, landscaping backyards and front yard patios at the cottage and on Fulford Street, at Gilkey Lake, and later on Miles Avenue.

Flowers and gardening was an intersection of love for my parents. Once Little League baseball had faded, and the kids moved on through high school, Dad put away the ballglove and Mom's routine slowed to a sprint, flowers bloomed all about Fulford Street and Gilkey Lake. Each of my parents has the soul of an artist. With Dad its kind of like an engineering project, sturdy decks and brave patios, winding red brick walks to backyard gardens with hidden fountains, he was a engineering machine. As he got older and the bricks got heavier, his focus turned to tulips and bittersweet. Mom loved flowers. Truly at peace on hands and knees, in shorts and a T-shirt, turning up soil, arranging bulbs, clipping bushes and capturing a spirit in the garden, a life complicated by Andy's troubles, things she couldn't control became focused and clean and peaceful. Over coffee on the front porch or back deck Mom and Dad would lay out plans for the backyard canvas and blazed many a trail to Wenke's, Wedel's, and Lowes.

Outside on the street mom began to "wake up." She did a lot of "door to dooring" for causes when we were kids; so I cannot say that this enlightenment was all a *late in life reckoning*. Amy and her walked in the rain for *March of Dimes*. Encouraged maybe by Andy's life, in the nineties she began to take on issues of the world. She was so inspired by Dr. King and loved that statue of him striding across the walk down by the Ministry in MLK memorial park. She often lamented that was the one that belonged in the D.C. Capitol rotunda. She was right; she usually was about Martin. For a longtime she wanted to travel to Hyde Park and visit the home of Franklin and Eleanor; In 2007 we (me and her and Amy) did. Before and after, she did her homework, and read all that she could about each of them. She worked tirelessly for Don Cooney and Howard Wolpe on all of their campaigns, as each shared a progressive worldview in the political arena. She and her friend Diane circulated "League of Women Voters" flyers throughout the Kalamazoo community every political season in effort to

enlighten others. And in 2004 she recuperated from a stroke by working three times a week at the Kerry campaign headquarters and all day long on election night. Her ultimate wish, for Hillary to be the first woman president of the United States of America, was probably her hardest political loss to bare.

As for the world - mom *hated* "The War in Iraq." And she never let us use that word "hate" as kids. She attended seminars at K-College and Western, sometimes with us, sometimes on her own, and listened and learned as speaker's defined "The War." She took an overnight bus trip to Washington D.C. and joined me and some of my students in a massive rally down Pennsylvania Avenue to protest "The War." She stood on Kalamazoo Avenue on Sunday afternoons, holding a peace sign with scores of other to voice her disapproval of "The War." She joined vigils in Bronson Park to bring awareness to the community to the injustice and pain of war. And she continued to keep that same grungy moldy decaying "Another Family for Peace" sign in the front yard through every season...until one day it just crumbled off the wire standards and blew away. She started the next week with a new version of the old sign.

In 2007 when the EPA tried to dump poisonous PCB chemicals into the Monarch Paper Mill sight behind Homecrest Circle, Mom joined the chorus of protest. She carried a picket sign. She marched with families from the Circle to the dump sight. She attended organizational meetings at St Josephs Church and at the Edison Community Center and handed out flyers up at Hardings, in an effort to keep the poison out of Milwood. And she was ready to lay down in front of the giant dump trucks in order to stop it. I was never ever so proud of my mom as the day, when with every ounce of sincerity in her tiny body, she revealed her personal defense plan for the trucks. "When they come, she revealed, we shouldn't stand in front of them. We need to get down underneath, in front of the back wheels; that way the trucks won't be able to move at all." Come on...you gotta love that. Obviously, we won.

For Mom, involvement in the world was *so much bigger* than just a political thing. Service dealt primarily with people. She truly believed that we all deserved an equal opportunity to the bounty of life and was painfully aware of those who couldn't find peace in their own heart and mind. The struggles that Andy endured before he passed piqued her compassion for those in need. Every Thursday afternoon Mom volunteered to serve lunch at *Ministry for Community*. She loved the full-time folks in the kitchen and probably saw a lot of Andy in the faces of those whom she served. After lunch her Thursday afternoons til 5:00 were spent answering the phone and paging clients. On Wednesday's she attended Tai chi class at the Helen Coover Center. I swear to god Tai chi provided her the wonderful quality of life she recovered after her stroke. And the breathing, the breathing allowed her to cope through many of the painful times at the end. On Friday afternoons Mom worked with the little ones at Washington Square Elementary "Writer's Workshop." She loved going in and listening to the teacher and the kids doing whatever she could to help along the process. Even at the end, when the pain from that leg was raising its ugly head she took volunteer shifts down at Red Arrow that would allow her favorite golf course in Kalamazoo to remain open.

There were so many other marvelous qualities to my mother. She longed to travel the world; even with such a late start on the agenda she got moving. Amy and I and her got out and about together. Summers from 2000 she chose a destination and we spent four days roaming. She always did her homework and before the stroke she buried us. That first trip to D.C. back in 2000 she walked us each straight into the ground! Each of us had to take an afternoon nap while the other one tagged along after mom on her assault of the city. All three of us looked forward to those summer sojourns. Boston, and Philly and New York City, New Baden Indiana, Chicago, and Selma, Alabama traveling the United States with Mom, we shared and ate and studied American history together. Seattle was on the docket this year before her health turned bad. She would have finally seen some mountains.

At the very core of my mom was the need to nurture personal relationships. Whether it was with Patrick our mailman who kept her abreast of all of the Independent films in the Kalamazoo Film Society, working at the Flowershop with Mara and Kathy, or the folks at the Ministry, clients and employees, she was genuinely interested in people's personal stories. She and her sister Suzie rediscovered an eternal *late in life* bond that had

drifted away. Sixteen years difference, they grew up semi-separated by age, and raised families on opposite sides of the state. A close sister-to-sister relationship, that just couldn't be nurtured, blossomed fully when Auntie Sue and Uncle Greg bought the Gilkey Lake cottage. Mom and her little sister have spent the past couple years as close as their life ever allowed. They've antiques and gardened and lunched together. They've laughed and cried and rediscovered one another. South Haven's Lake Michigan shoreline, always a peaceful destination, whether as a kid, a mother or a senior for Connie, was a place for her and Suzie to walk and talk. It's where we'll take mom's ashes and along with Suzie say goodbye to her body.

And then there were the animals, all of those animals. We always had pets running around the house on Fulford Street. Precious was a mutt that followed mom and Amy home on a rainy March of Dimes collection night. She grew up with us. I remember when Precious had her pups and we advertised them "for free" in the paper. A shady guy stopped by for the last one, mom said "No – you can't have the free puppy." He didn't seem caring enough for her. She asked him to leave, and put the advertisement back in the paper. Kittens and cats, Sarah and Missy and Abbey and Oliver and Sammy a handful of yippy little beagles lived with us at various times through the years. And for fourteen years Jenny – my dad's golden lab was also mom's best friend. Jenny was family with full privileges. She went on every ride, every walk, laid in front of every foot in every room, took every couch and every bed that our home could provide. Jenny knew exactly what mom and dad were thinking and when she passed in June of this year my mom and my dad lost a very very close friend. I think the loss was maybe the toughest casualty on her health. At least now mom is back with Jenny and with Andy.

In the end we had mom for nearly eighty years. That's a pretty good amount of time on this planet. And she was healthy for a good portion of it. She was involved for almost all of it. And she was sharp until the very end.

Dad loved mom. Amy and Andy and I loved mom. I think the world loved my mom. I know this planet is a better place for having her.

We will sorely miss her physical presence, and all of her contributions to the community and to the family. It was probably however, time to go...her little body was worn-out. As for her soul that we will never lose.

Mom's soul will be with us all for a very very long time to come.

Salamou Alaykoun - Mommo – Peace be upon you

If you'd like to donate to some of Mom's favorite causes...please take a look.

Ministry for Community: www.ministrywithcommunity.org - Every Thursday you could find her serving the members and answering the phones.

Building A Better World Scholarship:

www.buildingabetterworld.net - Mom donated every year to this college scholarship at Oakridge High School (my school) in Muskegon. Her and I started it together in 2003; along with a squad of five teachers every year we chose the winners.

Intact of Kalamazoo: www.interact.org - Interact helped Mom and Andy through some very difficult times. I think while Interact was never able to solve Andy's complicated issues, the love and compassion and professional nature of the case workers, I am sure improved my mother's life significantly. I do believe because of them she survived those very difficult times.

SPCA Southwest Michigan - www.spacswmich.org - Mom loved animals...particularly Jenny. And Precious too. Missy and Sarah as well. But most of all mom loved Jenny.

Life's most persistent and urgent question is,
'What are you doing for others?'

Martin Luther King, Jr