An Angel At Death — Dorothy Kirschner

The AIDS Memorial on Instagram revisits some of the amazing tributes submitted to the account.

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“My grandmother, Dorothy Kirschner (1918 - 2013) did not die of an AIDS-related condition. At 95, her body simply gave out. She willed herself to live that long and I would like to tell you why.

Dot was widowed in her early 50s in 1970 and had enough money that she did not need to work. However, in the very early 1980s, she noticed young men dying from a yet-to-be-named illness and the horror awakened something in her, so for the first time in her life, she went to work. She made millions, but not one cent of it for herself.

My grandmother started her career in AIDS activism as a fundraiser. She would put together very large affairs that raised tens of thousands of dollars for organizations that fed, clothed, sheltered and provided medication to people living with HIV/AIDS. She was referred to as “the benefit Czarina of Philadelphia.”

Often these benefits involved theatrical performances, and young as I was, my love of theater was already highly developed, so now and then she took me along. This was a big deal, as she kept the strands of her life very separate. But I will never forget those evenings. Here I was, barely a teenager, being introduced to gay men (I didn’t know I was gay yet, but I think she did), lesbians, drag queens, transgender individuals, ill people others would not touch, doctors, local politicians and more by my grandmother!

How many people in the 1980s had a grandmother who stashed condoms in every pocket or went to a synagogue simply because it had a lesbian cantor? “You must be so proud of your grandmother,” these dazzling people would say to me. That perplexed me. The woman I knew as Grandmom was quiet, even remote, not particularly fun. The woman they knew as Dorothy was an indefatigable passionate crusader who cursed out at least one mayor of Philadelphia.

My grandmother knew every celebrity who blew into town willing to be the bait for one of her fundraisers. We had no idea, unless we happened to see her picture in the paper with one of them She never bragged, never name-dropped (except Baryshnikov; decades before there was a term for it, she went all fan girl over him). Her refrigerator door was a montage of family pictures, to-do lists, recipes (not many, she was a terrible cook) and calendars nary a celebrity photo to be found. Her work was done on behalf of the sick and scared, not to feed the egos of the famous or even her own.

At some point, my grandmother soured on fundraising, but the war was not over, so she moved into the second phase of her activism, much smaller in scope, but epic in legacy. Dot would sit in the hospital rooms of dying HIV/AIDS patients, holding their hands right up until the moments they died. These were people, roughly the same age as her children, whose families had turned their backs on them, whose

“longtime companions,” in the parlance of the day, were banned from visiting. But, no one objected to a chic 4’10" senior citizen showing up. I can’t prove it, but I suspect she snuck in many a lover, partner or anyone else these dying individuals wanted to see (and probably some vodka as well).

At my grandmother‘s 70th birthday party, a toast was made to her as the “Angel of Death.” What he meant was “Angel at Death.” She was a surrogate mother to an entire community of people who had been shunned and marginalized, from the minute she met them until the minute she lost them. At her 75th birthday party, the man who had made the toast at her 70th, as well as many others, was long gone.

There was no 80th birthday party, as the ghosts were more numerous than the living. The emotional toll on someone present at the moments of death for so many people must have been crushing, but nothing compared to what the frightened sick people who relied on her kindness had felt, so she never complained. She barely mentioned it.

The only obvious outward sign of My grandmother‘s work was a red ribbon. Or actually more like 100 red ribbons. Each ribbon had special meaning to her as they were personalized, her last link to so many people she had lost. She wore at least one red ribbon every day, no matter what. She wore them to the hospital to hold all of those hands, to dinner at our house, to the grocery store, they were even on her bathrobe.

In her 90s, with her mind slipping, there were two thing she did every day. The first was find a way to smoke (“I’ve been smoking since I was 13, I’m not stopping now,” she would often say). The second was to put on her ribbons. By then it was a reflex action, somewhere deep in her mind she wanted to continue honoring all of the brave and wonderful people she had met in the long second act of her life. When she died, my first though was to hope she would be buried decked out in her ribbons. And she was.

I want to end this tribute to an unsung but remarkable hero with a funny touching story, though my grandmother would hate me telling it. At the very very end of her life, her mind now lost, she was in the hospital (still finding cigarettes, which baffled every employee in the place). Late one night, a man frantically called the nurse to his room. Some old lady in a hospital gown had just come in, woken him up, taken his hand and told him it was okay to let go, to rejoin all of the people who were waiting for him. She was the comforting Angel at Death one last time.

Except the man was in the hospital with a broken bone and in no danger of dying, thus his understandable panic.”— by BJ Kirschner

Want to submit a story about your loved one to feature on The AIDS Memorial on Instagram?

Simply email your story to theaidsmemorial@yahoo.com

with up to 10 photos and a message under 400 characters.

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