

# A Life of Hope

Grandmother inspires positive outlook for the new year | BY KIM COOPER FINDLING

**M**y New Year's resolution for 2009 is to be more like my grandmother. ■ I was fortunate to know my grandmother—Marion Elizabeth Beckendorf May—for 30 years. You'd expect that three decades would have given us ample time to get acquainted, and it did in many ways. I knew that she resided in Forest Grove, Oregon, for 60 years. For four decades she ran the local hardware store with her husband, Eldon. She raised a son and a daughter (who grew up to become my mother). She read scripture daily, always overcooked vegetables, never drank a drop of alcohol, walked her dog every morning at 7 A.M., and kept a kitchen drawer stuffed full of candy.

I knew that, long before I was born, she did things that seemed more legend than truth to me: climbed Mount Hood in 1931, graduated from college before most women even considered going, sold fine goods to well-off patrons in one of downtown Portland's best department stores.

She was the sort of person whose tireless optimism was matched only by an iron will. She was famously positive, always finding the best in everyone and everything. A simple cup of tea or a chirping bird at her window could fill her with delight. It was a common mistake to trivialize that polite, cheerful exterior and miss the fact that within her, positive energy was catalyzed directly into strength.

If there is one regret I have, it's that for all I knew and appreciated about my grandmother, there was still so much I didn't yet understand. From my youthful perspective—still so idealistic, still so untested—her constant optimism could seem naïve. Although her husband was a kind man, her marriage sometimes seemed to me like a burden. Her devout faith seemed conventional and binding. It can look simplistic, her kind of life: lighthearted, churchgoing, housewifely.

And yet, as I've forged my way through my 30s, as I've experi-

enced frustrations, joys, struggles, pain, I've realized how I underestimated her. I was still too young to understand the complicated dynamics of marriage, the value of spiritual practice, the peace and fortitude that can come from simply persevering with the most positive outlook you can muster.

I understand more and more that it is no small feat to live each day with optimism and cheerfulness. It is no simple thing to embrace the pleasures that come, whatever they may be and in whatever form. It isn't as easy as it looks, being happy.

When she was first diagnosed with cancer at the age of 80, Grandma made a proclamation: "I'm not going anywhere," she said. "I still have things to do."

She lived another decade and packed it full of all of the things she'd meant. She delivered meals on wheels to folks 10 years younger than herself, drove to church people 10 years older, applauded when her daughter earned a Ph.D., and my sister and I graduated from college, and hosted Thanksgiving every November. She saw in the new millennium and celebrated her 90th birthday that same year—two more milestones she'd been determined to make.

But more than anything else, over the course of those years, she laughed. She laughed at television shows. She laughed at the way her dog delighted in shared bites of sandwich. She laughed at the fluffy pink frosting that covered so many of her birthday cakes. She laughed at her own foibles and those of the whole world. Every day of her life, she found something to be happy about and wrapped herself around it.

That's what my grandmother represents to me, now—a self-manifested happiness. She personified a glass-half-full outlook anchored with an unshakable determination to wring the most from this life as humanly possible. It is this very approach to life that, more than anything at all, I'd love to emulate.

That, I believe, is why I often find my grandmother appearing in my sometimes troubled dreams: to remind me that a life full of meaning and hope is not only possible, it's a thing of beauty, worth reaching for every day.

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