

Thought of the Day—GFWC Southern Region, Oct. 29, 2006

Marian St. Clair

Seven mornings ago, I awoke to the sound of a shrill alarm clock in a dark hotel room at Furnace Creek Ranch in Death Valley, California. As I stepped from the room onto the balcony, I looked up to the black hills that enclose the desert and I saw a turquoise sky streaked with coral-colored clouds, and the sunrise took my breath away.

I had traveled to Death Valley with my husband, Tim, nineteen year old son, Daniel, and eighteen other cyclists and volunteers from Greenville, SC. Together we comprised the Chain Gang, a group that had raised more than \$70,000 for that day's "Ride for the Cure;" a 105 mile cycling excursion through one of the world's most foreboding landscapes, on a day that would reach more than 100 degrees, to benefit the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation.

With 300 other cyclists from around the country, Tim and Daniel would ride for the cure. As a volunteer, I would traverse the course in a support vehicle, helping riders in distress.

Eighteen miles into the ride, all was well. But soon after, a mother and daughter from the Wisconsin team touched wheels and crashed to the hardscrabble at the side of the road. The young girl, a 13 year old diabetic, had injured her knee, and her mother had scraped the skin from one of her palms. Despite their injuries, they wanted to go on.

I helped the mother clean and bandage her hand, and then stood by as she gently helped her daughter. Their determination to finish the ride, to push 100 miles closer to a cure, took my breath away.

Some riders carried photos of their children, or grandchildren, or nieces or nephews, taped to their helmets or pinned to their jerseys. Some of the riders rode for their own cure, stopping along the way to check their blood sugar and to administer insulin. Some of the riders rode for a beloved child who had died. Three hundred riders; 300 stories that took my breath away.

As the afternoon shadows lengthened, I returned to the ranch to cheer the cyclists as they crossed the finish line. When the announcer said, "Incoming rider, number 551," I knew it was Daniel and I rushed forward to the front of the crowd. Soaked in sweat, smeared with bike grease, I saw my youngest son cross the finish line with his arms raised in triumph and jubilation, and it took my breath away.

Seven mornings ago, I awoke to the sound of a shrill alarm clock in a dark hotel room at Furnace Creek Ranch in Death Valley, California—to a day filled with breathless moments, and I was reminded once again:

Life is better measured, not by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for the blessings of this meeting and for the benefits we derive from our volunteer efforts. We ask for Your guidance in the exchange of ideas and inspirations, and we pray that You grant us the power of faith, the presence of love, the purpose of knowledge, and the promise of days filled with breathless moments. Amen

The Recipe Box This past December, while visiting Virginia to see my mother, Evelyn, on her birthday, I reached into a kitchen cupboard for an electric mixer and was greeted by a familiar sight. It was a recipe box; a wedding gift received just before her marriage to my father, Al, in the 1950s, lovingly prepared by its benefactor with a dozen or so carefully typed favorites, such as White Mice Cookies and Apple Dapple Pudding.

The recipe box was a treasured friend, although by then it had been at least four years since my mother had fingered its smudged index cards and haphazardly folded newspaper clippings, and many months since she had been placed under full care for Alzheimer's disease at a skilled nursing facility.

In the 1960s, when I was quite young to be in a kitchen on my own, my mother taught me to cook. It was country fare without frills, food to nourish the blended family of eight that was formed after father died and my mother married a farmer with three children of his own.

The recipe box, always close at hand, was rarely required for family meals. Instead, it was the source of tasty desserts, baked goods, and preserves, while the box's dividers for meats and vegetables and other unremarkable foods were shoved towards the back.

With Christmas just days ahead, I couldn't resist the impulse to open the box and skim its contents, nor the urge to ask my stepfather, Sherman, if I could have it for my own. Suddenly, I couldn't imagine anything more important, more a symbol of my mother's influence, than the battered box in my hands.

When I think of my mother, I cannot help but remember she was the first leader in my life. My earliest memory is of hot afternoon at my grandparent's farm, sitting in the dirt at my mother's feet while she looped tobacco with other women. I went everywhere she went and was totally dependent on her comfort and care, especially for the nourishment of my body and soul.

Now, as an adult, I can't recall a single day of my childhood when I didn't think I was the cat's meow. She guided me and encouraged me, building my confidence and independence, even when raising three daughters as a single mom at the age of 31, when no day passed without grief and trouble.

My mother would have never have considered herself a leader, but I think she would have recognized and applauded the strength of the family that cared for her in her last days and then reminisced with relatives and friends at her visitation and funeral service in the first week of May. And I know she would have felt proud, the way a mother should.

Alzheimer's, as everyone knows, is a terrible disease. There is the heartache of seeing someone you love fail mentally and then physically, and there is pain because there is no hope for a better future. For me, there was also a sad sense of abandonment, since few outside the immediate family are comfortable with the sufferer's mental aberrations and feel able to help.

Modern medicine is not always our friend. Even with medical directives in place, my mother lived a life she would not have wanted in her last years. But I don't hesitate for a moment to say that there are wonderful, self-sacrificing professionals, especially nurses, who meet and master challenges every day for the sake of others.

And I want you to know that you should never doubt that you can provide comfort to someone, even when they don't remember you, with touch and voice. Holding my mother's hand, rubbing her arthritic neck, and singing "Jesus Loves Me," first with her, and later for her, always helped us both.

When I arrived home with the recipe box, just days before a New Year's feast of country ham and collards—fixed mama's way, of course—I was eager to examine each recipe card, especially those in her own handwriting. What I found, however, was totally unexpected. Behind those empty card dividers at the back of the box was a crumpled and torn receipt. It was dated four days after my birth and noted payment of seven dollars for "Hospitalization 4 days."

The faded paper didn't prove anything I didn't already know. I was always certain of my mother's love. I knew, too, the day of my birth, and those of my sisters, where among the happiest of her life.

I didn't know, however, that my mother would whisper endearments even when she couldn't speak, or that she could comfort me when she couldn't lift a hand. And I didn't know she would continue to nourish me body and soul, even when no day passed without grief and trouble.

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