

Shirley Berdie Remembered

By Rabbi Esther Adler

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The long vigil has ended. The faithful guardians of love and devotion had to stand aside and give way. The valiant will to live had to give way to a greater will, and we are faced with the reality of this hour; This hour for which we are never prepared, no matter how much we prepare, which we never expect, no matter how much we know it is coming.

Shirley was the very personification, of valiant will. Look up the word valiant and you find such adjectives as bold, intrepid, indomitable, unflinching, and also spirited, plucky and spunky. Turn the page to "will" and you find determination, drive, purposefulness, tenacity.

And so I have just described Shirley Sher Berdie - a woman of valiant will, indomitable drive, spunky determination. She was born on Groundhog Day in 1925, but I don't think she ever really saw her shadow, because she would have had to stop moving to do so. Shirley was more like the Energizer Bunny than Punxsutawney Phil. Always on the go, willing to try something new, stepping up and taking charge first as a volunteer, then as a teacher, then again as a volunteer, always as a friend, mentor, and devoted family member.

Shirley came from a large, close Birmingham family. Her mother Pearl was one of 8 siblings and the entire extended family was very close and stayed so over the generations and miles. So, although Shirley was born and raised in Duluth, she had very fond memories of family reunions in Alabama.

Shirley went to college at the U of M, where she met John, and they were married in her childhood home in Duluth and began to build their family. They had two boys Mitch and Craig, and then Reine. When Shirley was pregnant with Reine, she had to take to her bed because she had rheumatic fever. To help her get through the long days, John bought the family a TV set - the first in the neighborhood. All the neighbors came over to watch the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth. That was an important moment for Shirley. I think from then on Shirley identified with the young monarch. It can't be coincidence that she named her daughter Reine, which means "queen." And Shirley and Elizabeth were the same age, both curly-haired beauties, both married at age 21, and both had sons the same age. And they both loved being queen.

While Elizabeth reigned over the Commonwealth, Shirley reigned over the many volunteer organizations she was involved in, and later over her classrooms. As a young wife and mother Shirley became an indomitable volunteer, rising quickly to leadership roles in NCJW and then the League of Women Voters, because, in addition to a passion for making the world better, she loved being in charge. She led the Duluth Section of the Council of Jewish Women in the 1950s and was active in the League of Women Voters, serving as its chair from 1963-65. There Shirley worked on the Equal Rights Amendment, education policies, and helped to rewrite the Minnesota Constitution. In her mid-thirties, Shirley went back to school for a teaching degree. The family celebrated a double graduation: Mitch from High School and Shirley from UMD. Shirley thrived in the classroom, influencing the lives of children in Duluth for 20 years; first in special ed, then in fourth grade. I think it is safe to assume that many of her young charges followed her role modeling and became leaders of their communities, as did Mitch, Craig, and Reine, who all became involved in social justice and volunteering.

Shirley loved to lead and was often Leading Lady as well. She was a talented actress in local theater, and also somewhat of a producer as well. She was involved in a theater group at her synagogue in Asheville, and helped put on the Hard Lox Cafe, raising funds for the synagogue. When an ice storm hit during Jesse's Bat Mitzvah weekend, Shirley, who had planned the whole thing cried, "The show must go on!" And it did.

When Shirley and John retired to Asheville, Shirley returned to being Queen of Volunteerism. She and John were like the Matriarch and Patriarch of the synagogue there, she was a Docent for Urban Trail Walking Tour of Asheville, the RiverLink, and the Vanderbilt Estate, was a volunteer Mediator, taught parenting skills at the Women's Prison, and once again became president of the League of Women Voters, becoming especially involved in voter registration. All this got her nominated as Woman of the Year in Asheville.

In her spare time, Shirley took classes, acted, went swimming and played golf and bridge, and went to theater and concerts, in between acting as chauffeur for John and preparing his daily happy hour.

Woven through all this was a court of devoted friends and extended family who adored Shirley. Her grandchildren and nieces and nephews were her pride and joy. She loved having visits from them, and they loved spending time with her. She was definitely the fun grandma and aunt who was active and adventurous, and willing to try anything.

Eventually she outlived her friends in Asheville, and so moved back to Minnesota, where she re-established herself with family, friends, and activities. She was a very proud woman, used to being, as I said before, indomitable, so the last couple of years as she aged were hard for her. She had always been the one in charge, so it was hard to accept that she was in need of help. But through it all, she kept her head up and her standards royal. Even recently, when hospitalized, she wanted to know if the room had a view and if there would be lace curtains on the window. The family always had her back through it all, especially Reine who was her stalwart Lady-in-waiting, as it were, lovingly caring for Shirley even when things got really hard over the last few months.

Death is not the enemy of life, but its companion, for it is the knowledge that our years are limited which makes them so precious. Death cannot erase a life, and the love that ennobled it. True you will not see Shirley again, nor hear her familiar voice. That is you will not see with your eyes, nor hear as you heard before. But in your mind's eye you will see; and in the holy of holies of your hearts, you can cherish the image of your proud, regal, valiant, curly-haired Shirley.