

95 Never Looked So Good

A tribute, written by her granddaughter, to Carolyn McCarthy, 95, who passed away Sunday in a fire in her home.

By Sara Pepitone



"Guided by faith, she was still embracing and thoroughly enjoying the many wondrous aspects of life." Photo credit: Carolyn McCarthy's family

Carolyn McCarthy lived in Madison, Clinton and Old Lyme before [passing away just before 1 p.m. Sunday in a fire in her home in Old Lyme](#). This was written by Sara Pepitone, one of Carolyn McCarthy's granddaughters:

When someone passes away at the age of 95, it's understandable to attribute it to the natural order of things, assuming they had wrung every last bit of enjoyment out of living. But that was not the case for Carolyn McCarthy, who died Sunday. Guided by faith, she was still embracing and thoroughly enjoying the many wondrous aspects of life.

She didn't seem a day over, uh, 65. And she surely did not go gently into that good night.

The occasion of her passing received much attention. She is the extraordinary figure who briefly survived a major fire in her home in Old Lyme, CT, escaping a room engulfed in flames, escaping the apartment in which the fire grew, collapsing a few hundred feet later where she was found by a caring neighbor, who prayed with her until the paramedics arrived.

It is a special kind of awful yet in no way impossible to imagine that she was lucid, asking questions and talking, in good company. Because that is how she lived her life.

Born in New York City in 1918, she spent her grammar school years in Staten Island where she literally walked over a mile to school and back, in weather of all kinds, along then-unpaved roads, accompanied by the family dog who waited outside while she was in class. The first of many canine companions, forever a source of joy.

Her immigrant grandparents operated a waterfront sports and social club used by bankers and businessmen. One of the members deemed her "Mudggily" (there was a "Pudggily" and "Gudggily" too) a nickname altered to "Mudge" that joined her through life, a memory of a happy childhood. Her mother was there too. Her father was a traveling salesman who sent her postcards from such exotic locales as Columbus, Ohio.

It was her grandmother who taught her to cook, who taught her most everything, who took care of her when she had Scarlet Fever and was quarantined from school for months, and who celebrated when she was given a medal by Mayor Jimmy Walker, for a winning essay on Fire Prevention, an honor mentioned in *The New York Times*. The Great Depression moved the family into Manhattan where they lived with aunts and uncles and sometimes friends, each of whom helped shape the life of the only child. But it was her grandmother who had the greatest impact, whose instructions she referenced, whose religious devotion she emulated, whose elegant hand-painted night table she had by her gorgeous sleigh bed.

Her entire interior decor was a showcase of her exquisite good taste, and whims, which followed and often led design trends. She was forever altering and adjusting, changing accessories, rugs, upholstery, wall colors. Her daughter, my mother, has memories of constant paint fumes. My uncle inhaled the same.

A true New Yorker, my grandmother's humor, confidence, resourcefulness, style (the move from heels to flats was as traumatic as the move from flats to running shoes) and quest for all things superior was supported by her extraordinarily sharp mind and thoughtfulness.

In the hours and days since she's been gone everyone from family to friends to merchants she frequented (always recognizing quality, if you were a great butcher, fishmonger, ice cream or chocolate maker, dry cleaner, launderer, tailor, hair dresser, organic purveyor, dentist, doctor, farmer, restaurateur, parishioner, priest she quickly evolved from loyal customer to friend) have remarked upon their love and her "sweetness." which certainly means she was engaging. She could speak to any topic, a favorite being current events, reacting to news from the radio or "telly." And she did, at length, with anyone drawn to her, for which the listener would be rewarded greatly, with access to her intelligent banter, and as the most important person on earth.

That above all was her particular talent – exalting anyone in her presence. Until I fully appreciated this enviable skill, I was certain I was the favorite grandchild, though she had seven worthy others, four from each of her children, all in possession of her cleverness and wit. She could make anyone feel singular and special; in person, by thank you note or highly personalized card (an image on front reminded her of you, an effort preceding holidays and the birthdays of 14 great-grand-children, and all family and spouses). She tried email a few years ago, but that wasn't her thing. A generation or so younger and she'd undoubtedly have had multiple electronic devices, texting from one hand while tweeting from another.

Not surprisingly, wherever she went – from the City to Long Island to Connecticut - a community immediately sprouted around her. She lived alone, but was never alone. Social to the end, her last day was a series of errands and hour-long conversations (including confession; always verbal). I can picture my mother intertwined in the long cord of the phone, so many days of my childhood, half hostage, half holding on to whatever my grandmother was considering on the other side of the line, because no matter what the conversation's true focus, if you were with her you were special.

She also knew how to push the limits of patience and sanity, expecting only the best from everyone and everything, but few things were more gratifying than being in her presence when she was fully engaged, which was often.

She spoke of nights in the City with my grandfather and their best friends as if they were out last week (Prohibition? What Prohibition?!). And it was hardly a month ago she was hitchhiking across the shoreline to keep appointments she'd made.

It seemed she would always be with us, talking Yankees, Obama, Cary Grant, Pope Francis, Corgies or Chanel, needing something she'd just heard about, dumbfounded that we had no idea what it was (a health powder sure to extend

life though more commonly used for pets). It seemed her leaving us was a mere threat.

There were scares, but only something really significant, outstanding, dramatic would do it. People at the scene, considering her effort, use words like strong, amazing, fighter. People elsewhere use the same and add powerful, impressive. 95 never looked so good.

There will be a memorial service Monday, November 18th, 10am

Christ the King Church, 1 McCurdy Road, OldLyme, CT

In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions may be made to Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers(914-941-0783; maryknoll.org).