

## **"Mother"**

*Dian Odell  
Betty's Oldest Child*

First, I would like to acknowledge Liana Reeves, Gov. Kitzhaber's General Counsel, and Steve Powers, her deputy. They came today representing the Governor and his office, and earlier presented to Betty's family a ceremonial memorial Oregon State flag, in honor of the many years of dedication and service that Betty Roberts gave to the people of this state. Thank you so much for this recognition.

After Mom published her book, I usually went with her to speaking engagements. Sometimes there would be a question directed to me... something along the lines of "What is it like to have her for a mom?" Well, it was many things, because her life as a mother changed so dramatically over the years.

But in all phases and ages, whatever it was, it became "our normal."

In my pre-school days and through most of my grade school years, our normal matched that of nearly every other kid's – we had a stay-at-home mom. And as any parent knows, organization is the key – and, Mom was organized by nature. Which was good, because there were 4 of us kids – me, John Jr, Jo, and Randy, spread out in ages over 9 years. During those early days in La Grande, her organization was to take care of all household things and us... washing, ironing, grocery shopping, canning, baking, cleaning house, painting rooms, sewing ballet costumes, acting as room mother or cub scout den mother. At one point, she was PTA president. Even then, I wondered how she did it, no matter the season. In winter I wondered how she managed to get all of our wet snowsuits, hats, boots, and gloves dry before we wanted to go out again. She appeared to work wonders.

But she wasn't a miracle worker, she was just organized. She knew that if she was organized she could get the "have-to's" done and there would be time for the "want to's." On weekends the whole family would go for drives around the countryside, play kick-the-can at dusk, walk down for ice cream. Church on Sundays, big dinner afterward. We all

learned to sit still in performances of the Eastern Oregon symphony. She was the perfect 1950s wife and mother.

And because it was the 50s and it was a small town and she was busy ...the oldest kids, my brother John and I, had a lot of freedom. We'd spend the whole day at the swimming pool, or up in the hills, or riding our bikes with friends, or, as was the case with John, selling newspapers to cowboys and railroad men in the main street bars. In those years, we had 2 rules - (1) if you changed location, you had to run home and tell her first. And (2) if you heard the whistle, you had to go home right away. The whistle was a regular ref whistle on a string and you could hear it for a several block radius ... and the dog (who was always with us) could hear it much further. The whistle usually meant dinner time so it was easy to mind it and rush home.

While in La Grande, Dad's job involved traveling to small towns all over eastern Oregon on crookedy 2-lane roads -- rain or shine or snow or wind. It was in these years that Mom began to worry about how could she take care of all of us, if something happened to Dad, like something had happened to her dad. Being a teacher was an option for a woman in those days and there was that Eastern Oregon College on the other side of town. She waited until I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and deemed old enough to stay with my brothers and sister for a few hours at night, and it was then that Mom started going to night school.

Her school time had to be organized around caring for us kids and the household duties - and sometimes these could be cleverly merged. She had one PE credit to get out of the way, so she registered for a golf class. The class met on one of the days she was home with Randy (he was 3 years old). Because she refused to give up that day with him, she took him to the first class and told the coach that her son would be with her every day. She did not ask if it was okay, nor wait for the coach to object. In fact, when they started using light plastic balls to practice, the coach would let Randy stand at the other end of the gym and gather up the balls. After class she and Randy always spent some time looking through the fence at the new building under construction. He loved the trucks and bulldozers, and each week they talked about how much had been done since they were last there.

In 1956, Dad was transferred to Portland to be a branch manager. Our “normal” changed again. Dad no longer traveled Monday through Friday. I went into 7<sup>th</sup> grade, John into 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, Jo into 1<sup>st</sup> and Randy was only 4 years old. Mom arranged childcare for Randy 3 days each week and she arranged her classes to fit those days.

In 1958, when Randy started 1<sup>st</sup> grade, Mom began teaching at Reynolds High School. Anyone who has read her book knows that our parents divorced as a result of her going to work and “normal” changed again.

As a working single parent with four school-age kids to feed, Mom’s biggest ally was the freezer. We all, including Mom, took a sack lunch to school. That’s five lunches a day to prepare. Why not do it once a week and be done with it? So, on Sunday nights after dinner, Mom would make 25 sandwiches – tuna fish, baloney, cheese, peanut butter and jelly, or whatever – and freeze them. Then, all that had to be done each week night was retrieve the required number of sandwiches from the freezer, plop them in a brown paper bag and compliment with an apple or banana and a cookie. The cookies, by the way, were also made in advance by Mom. She would double or triple the recipe, then off to the freezer they’d go. Everything thawed by lunchtime.

We all had our chores and tasks. We did not get an allowance for doing our jobs. It was just what we did. Like if your parents were farmers, you need to milk the cows. If your parent owns a store, you need to help stock shelves. Well, if your parent is running for election, there are campaign tasks that have to be done. And we did them – stuffed envelopes, marked up maps, filled bags with brochures for door-to-door kits. In one campaign, John had a car and was supposed to be delivering lawn signs. But he kept putting it off and one morning Mom left him a note, telling him those signs HAD to be out of the garage by the time she got back from Salem. Well, when she got home – those 30-some signs were out ... but all in our yard – installed in the lawn, in the bushes, and even in the basketball hoop. She laughed about it and took pictures ... but he made sure the signs were really delivered to the right places the next day.

I went off to college about the time she was becoming more active publicly. Those legislative and law school years meant a very different “normal” for John and Jo in high

school, and Randy close behind. We had always had a lot of freedom, but because of her evening commitments and commute times to Salem, now that freedom came out of necessity.

John says during his high school years, he was the envy of his friends because he had no curfew. But he was also viewed as the “rational one,” the one who could be trusted to drive. Mom made sure he knew that freedom meant being responsible for your actions. Now that he was older, Mom updated and expanded his rules a bit: (1) get at least C’s in school, (2) be the nice guy, (3) keep your head on straight, (4) don’t get arrested, and (5) don’t get anyone pregnant.

And for Randy, he says he had plenty to do independently with school, with drums and sports. It might have served his 8<sup>th</sup> grade band well that she was not there more often; they practiced in the basement pretty much every day. He remembers friends having moms at home when he went to their houses, but those moms being home never made him feel unattended to by his mom. Everything seemed normal to him and he was oblivious to the difference.

But for Jo, as a teenage girl, she says the freedom was just “absence” for her. She wanted her mom there, at home, for whatever she needed and had on her mind. She remembers how important her first high school dance was and Mom could not be there to help her get ready. When she got home from the dance, Mom was still up and dressed and ready to hear all about it – but this only partly made up for her earlier absence. Jo missed having Mom around more during those years, but says that all of Mom’s choices became understandable, admirable, and appreciated, when she suddenly faced life as a single mother herself.

Mom married Keith Skelton, and his 4 kids, Carol, Doug (Keith Jr), Ann and Tom, similar in age to us, joined our family. And we all grew up and started our own families. The family was ever growing, and making the new “normal”. Mother was clearly the leader of the whole extended family you see here. As matriarch, she sometimes gave commands and tried to control. Or she tried to convince and discuss and get you to see other/better options. She worked hard to keep family close and in touch – with her house being the focal point of holidays and birthdays and “just because”. Sit-down dinners for 27-30 was

common, with 14 concurrent conversations, much wine drinking, inspections of new boyfriends and girl friends. If any of us 4 did not talk to her in a week or so, she would be calling us.

When you were with her, you knew she was present, focused, in the moment. She saved thinking about tomorrow or her next speech for its own time. Fairness mattered ... in attention from her, in tasks, in punishments, even in financial assistance at various points to us kids. Fairness, but not sameness. She would think about what does this person that I love need (or what did she think they needed) and figure out how to give it.

So, as a mother, she was what you all saw in the other roles of her life – she was organized, got a lot done, expected a lot of herself and of you. She started with freedom and trust and expected you to fulfill your obligations. She was giving, caring, demanding, nurturing and forgiving.

As she makes clear in the dedication of her book, it was all for us. She did what she did to create the world she needed so she could take care of us. She did it to create the world she wanted us to be in, that would let us make our choices, to be who we wanted to be. Having her as our mom might have been different from what other kids experienced with their moms at the same time. But she was our Mom. Just Mom. We were so thoroughly loved. And that was our unchanging “normal.”