

Lee Kuhn Funeral Eulogy

Mother, Grandmother, Great Grandmother, Aunt, Great Aunt

Robert Lawrence Kuhn (son)

Wednesday, April 25, 2018

[Including post-funeral additions, based on comments received, additional memories, and quiet reflections]

When Lena Kahn was in the first grade, her teacher asked her to go into the hall to check the time on the clock. Although Lena sat in the first-row, first-seat – that’s how kids were ranked in those days, she was always, she said, first-row, first-seat – she did not yet know how to tell time – but No Way was Lena Kahn going to admit her lack of knowledge to her teacher. She was too proud. So, she waited in the hall until some Good Samaritan came along who could tell her the time. Upon returning to the classroom with the correct time in tow, little Lena concocted the story that the reason she took so long was that she wasn’t feeling well and had to go to the bathroom.

Other than Lena Kahn becoming Lee Kuhn, that little girl never changed.

She was always proud; she was also a fighter.

Some years ago, when she was still walking on her own, she fell at the assisted living facilities, but she refused to call for help. “For an hour,” she told me, “I pushed along the floor with my tush - until I could finally get up on my own.”

Three or four years ago in the assisted living facilities, when Lee was 98 or 99 years old, I gave her \$100 for spending money - on hair, toiletries, and the like. A nurse came by, saw the money sitting out on a table, and said to her, “You shouldn't leave money around”.

When the nurse left, Mom, mortified at being chastised, chastised me. She told me that I should have explained to the nurse that I had given my mother the money because I owed my mother the money. There were two reasons for this, Mom said; first, Mom wouldn’t look like she was getting a handout, and second, the nurse wouldn't think money is always lying around.

About a year ago, when she could still speak some, she grew annoyed, during one of my visits, that I was focusing on my computer, not focusing on her, and so she said to me, out loud for all in the cafeteria to hear - “With all that junk you’re doing on that machine, at least are you making any money?”

Years earlier, she had a leg problem and the doctor thought it might be a small stroke, and so to be cautious, while he was awaiting test results, he prescribed drugs to prevent blot clots. She didn't want to take the drugs – she was appalled at the cost - \$125 for 30 pills! - but I convinced her to take the drugs. When, a few days later, we returned to the doctor's office, and he reported the good news that a stroke had been ruled out, Mom was not so much pleased at the clear diagnosis as she was angry at the cost of what turned out to be unnecessary medicine. "Three pills for \$125," she snapped at the doctor, "What do I do with the remaining 27?" "Save them," the doctor said calmly, "in case you need them in the future." "No," said Mom, "I will save them, but only so you can tell me when another patient needs them, and then I will sell them to back to you."

Yes, Lee, at times, was sharp-tongued - and as we all age, well, the social inhibitory capacity of the brain grows weaker. If Lee thought it, Lee said it.

Even after advancing dementia stole the speech from this loquacious lady, she could intermittently blurt out remarkably coherent ideas.

An aide told me that, after not saying a word for days, she suddenly pointed at one aide and, with a strong voice, said: "It's not that I don't want to talk, it's that I don't want to talk to YOU!"

Another time, she announced to all the aides in the communal dining room. "My son pays for all your salaries. I will tell him you are not doing your jobs."

Yet, she would always offer an enthusiastic "Thank You" to aides who were helping her with the uncomfortable aspects of advanced age.

One time, a few years earlier, she was angry that the aides in assisted living took away her food tray before she was finished; she barricaded her door with furniture. No one could believe how this tiny, frail, old lady could move the furniture. The mystery remains, like how the ancient Egyptians moved those huge stones to build the pyramids.

When one nurse patted her shoulder, she said, "Don't touch me. Don't think I'm old."

Lee changed her first name by intent, more than marriage changed her last name by custom – just one letter in her last name, from Kahn to Kuhn, just "a" to "u". But "Lena", a beautiful name to our ears now, was discarded - because at the time, the phrase "Leaping Lena" was derisive and she was too proud.

Arriving at assisted living in her mid 90s, already one of the oldest of the 200+ residents, she said, "I don't like this place; all the people have wrinkles; they're too old." Later, in her late 90s, she lamented, "People here are too old. They are all grey and not smiling. I can't walk but I can smile."

Lee did not like being old. In her last years, she would squeeze her fists tightly as if to express frustration with the ravages of age. The frustration was, probably, in part, not being able to complain about something.

Upset she couldn't attend her great-granddaughter Zarouhi's Birthday Party, she lamented, "When you Get Older, You don't Get Younger."

When Mom saw that I was writing and commentating about China, one day she said, "Are you with the Communists?"

I said No, adding, "but I explain how they think."

"You're *weird*," she said.

When I laughed, she said she was happy to make me laugh.

When Mom was 96, Mom asked what I was doing. I said I was working on a conference called "Alternative Concepts of God" for my TV show Closer To Truth. She said, Like What? I said, like Pantheism, God is Everything. Frowning, she said, "Who made that up?"

When, two years ago, I was conversing about Mom with Hospice, thinking Mom could not understand, she said suddenly, "This is Ridiculous." Hospice is normally engaged in only the last 6 months of life; they need to justify their diagnosis in order to be paid by government funds. Mom was on Hospice for over 2 years; it would have given her great satisfaction to know they she had given Hospice "trouble". In all seriousness, Hospice provided a wonderful service; I can think of no better expression of humanity.

Lee was always first row, first seat, but, in her times, from a poor immigrant family, and female, she began work as a secretary at Neptune Apparel. Almost immediately she spotted a big, handsome guy. All the girls were chasing Lou Kuhn.

"I got him by playing hard to get," Lee liked to explain, occasionally exhorting young girls to follow her example.

It was mom's 21st birthday and she was desperately hoping that Lou would call her. When Lou did call, although her heart skipped and pounded as she instantly recognized his voice, she maintained her composure and her strategy, and so she said coolly, "Who is this?" - and when Lou said, "Lou", she responded, preplanned, quizzically, "Lou Who?" "Lou Who!". "Lou Who" became a family favorite.

Lou's side of the story was that his answer was, "You damn well know, Lou Who!"



What happened after that is opaque but here are the next two pieces of evidence. The first is Lee and Lou's wedding photo.



The second is Lee and Lou on their honeymoon in Florida.



We kept these photos in Lee's room so that aides who saw this very old, very frail woman would know what a vivacious, perky, proud — yes, sexy — girl she really was. I want everyone who knew Lee to see these photos.

Mom had a first child before me, Charles, whom, after 8 or so months, was diagnosed with incurable microcephalus — though his head seemed normal, brain development was incomplete and he was severely impaired. The hopeless condition had been masked, the doctor said, only because Mom was taking such extraordinarily good care of Charles, constantly and intensely. The doctor said he had never seen such smooth skin. Charles cried incessantly, literally all the time — nothing could stop his crying. Charles had to be placed in a permanent facility; Dad was now drafted and away training for the War; and Mom had a breakdown.

Dad decided that only another child could cure his wife, so, just before he was to be shipped off to Europe, he obtained special permission for a brief furlough, timed at the right time of the month. I'm told that I am the product of that liaison. I'm not sure this is how I really came to be — perhaps the story grew over time — but Mom enjoyed the telling.

Mom kept Charles a secret from me. He had died when he was five and I was two and a half. Then, when I was about 12 or 13 years old, as was my habit in those days, I was teasing my sister, Karen, then about 7 or 8. My usual scare was, "There are monsters living in the bins in our attic." If that wasn't enough, I'd whisper, "You can hear them moving," altering her to the settling creeks of the house. One day, I added a new tease: I was the first born, I taunted Karen, and she was the second born. Mom had heard enough and abruptly said to me, "You were not the first born." I froze, started to cry. Mom said she was only kidding, but I knew she was not.

When I was born, Mom, remembering Charles, started screaming in the delivery room — "Why isn't my baby crying?" she yelled. The doctors laughed, "Because he has his thumb in his mouth." She liked that story.



When I was about four or five, Mom told me not to take a tin can top into the bathtub. I guess I didn't find her warning especially interesting and within seconds the tub was streaming red. My mother and father rushed to stop the blood, gushing from my left middle finger. The bleeding would not stop. Frantic, Mom called whomever she could, but without confidence that help would arrive soon enough. She remembered there was a doctor living somewhere in the large apartment building. She knocked on every door until she found someone who knew the doctor's apartment. In seconds, she brought the doctor, in his bathrobe, to our apartment. (For years, I'd remember which hand was left or right by rubbing furtively on that scar.)



Living in Stuyvesant Town, my fondest memory is Mom taking me, on special occasions, to a hole-in-the-wall New York pizza parlor; that smell cannot be replicated.

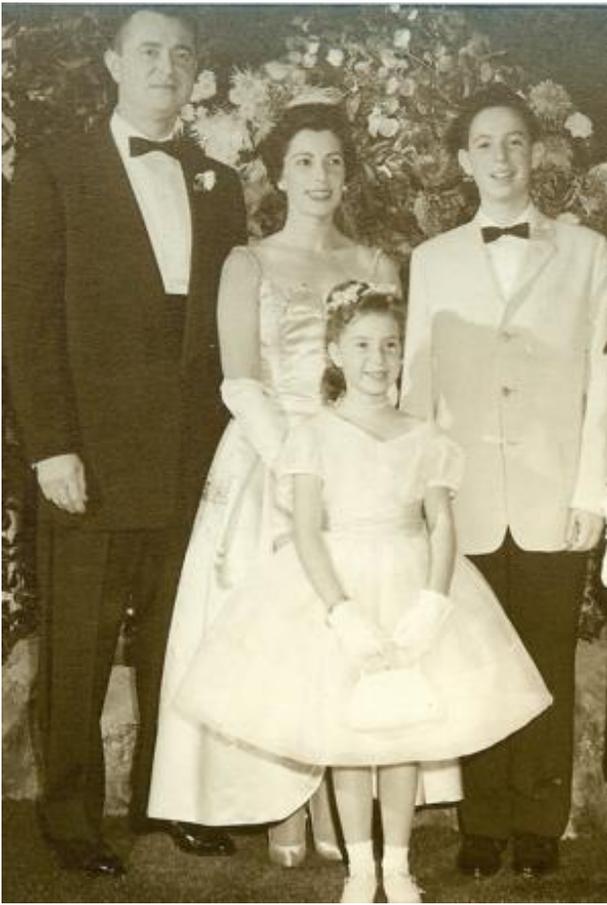
Not my fondest remember is moving to Lawrence, New York, in the third grade, in March 1953, and finding myself about a full year behind academically, with the school soberly recommending to Mom that I should be put back into second grade. Mom resisted — not her son! As it happened, about two or three weeks later was the spring break and the family was off on our first trip to Miami. Every morning, Mom drilled me on spelling — never my best subject — over and over and over, until I got it.

Growing up in Lawrence, I remember Mom’s chicken sandwiches and the smell of meatballs cooking, and her delight in finding gefilte fish that was light and fluffy. I loved those Rice Krispy marshmallow squares – that was before broccoli and blueberries captured my diet.

My closest grade-school friend recalls that Lee was always welcoming, with lots of energy and a wry sense of humor. Many decades later, after his mother had died, my mother would periodically call my old friend to chat, see how he was doing. She left no doubt, my friend told me, that she maintained her special sense of wry humor.

One of my mother’s happiest moments was at my Bar Mitzvah in 1957. She was especially proud that I read from the Torah as well as from the Haftorah, though even then I knew that it really wasn’t a big deal.





I remember so distinctly, on my 50th birthday, Mom being somewhat dazed that, with the tragedy of Charles burned into her memory, she was able to have a 50-year old son. Well, this day, April 25, the day of Mom's funeral — if I may be permitted some license of language — she has a 50-year old *grandson*: Aaron Kuhn was 50 years old that same day, April 25, 2018.

When Karen and I were growing up, Mom was wholly dedicated to our needs and welfare. She never ever hesitated to drive us here and there. She always cooked our dinner, waiting for Dad to return home, announcing his arrival with his iconic horn honk – *dum-da-da-dum-dum, dum-dum*.

When I visited Mom at assisted living, it was often after playing serious table tennis, and when Mom saw I was sweating, especially during winters, she bought a hair dryer and insisted I use it.

While Mom loved and was intensely proud of her children, she was not always thrilled with the things I did, which, admittedly, were a bit strange, especially to the daughter of immigrants who desired to conform to her family's new country.

If she thought I was wrong, she would tell me so. On more than one occasion, she would say to me, "You were bright, but became 'Not Bright'."

Another phrase she loved, when pulling down some pretense, was "It's a big Nothing".

In her last years, she was always complimenting aides on how they looked and dressed. Prior, her sartorial analyses were not always so polite.

Lee had style; she was glamorous and she loved being glamorous. Hair, clothes, nails, shoes — the latest fashion, pulled together.

"Stunning" was her favorite word to express glamor — and she was stunning.

Because she lived into her hundreds, living a very long time as a very old woman, it is easy to forget what a glamorous woman Lee was.

We musn't.



This from her niece, Louise Kane:

Aunt Lee was fashionable with an artistic sense, but what I remember most is how she cared for her family. I will never forget the time when, with three young children, I was having a bad spell. I called Aunt Lee and confided in her. She then hopped into her car and drove all the way from Lawrence to New City, a long drive. She stopped off along the way, buying lots of things for me and my house — I remember walnut oil — and buying things for my children. She did the dishes and did the wash. Today, that is what I remember.

Lee had high standards and good taste; the decorators of the Lawrence house had their hands full.

Lee was a natural writer with a breezy style, offering diverse details and observations that collectively painted rich portraits of simple events or occasions, like birthdays and anniversaries — she never missed a one.

Lee was an organizer; everything had its place. She was also a perfectionist; she sought to find and do the best. Food in the refrigerator, items on tables, she sought the optimum – even when, well, there was no optimum.

In her late 90s, we visited Wellwood Cemetery together; she wanted to visit the graves of Lou, Charles, Kate, Julius, and her mother and father. She saw the plot reserved for her but wasn't much bothered by it. What did bother her was something about how the graves were lined up. She had a better way and was annoyed that I refused to ask Wellwood to make the multiple moves.

When Lee was 92, she complained that she didn't want help in the house because "I will have to cook them lunch." Mom, I said, they are supposed to cook you lunch.

Having moved from her Arizona home to assisted living in New York, she refused to make friends. Why should I, she said, insisting, "I'm not staying long; I'm going back to my home". In her first years in New York, she often talked about returning to her own house and living independently. In her late 90s, she told the daughter of a neighbor, "I am not going to be here much longer." The poor lady felt awful, naturally assuming Mom meant she would soon die, and the lady marveled at what seemed to be Mom's spirit and grit. I quietly explained that Mom is planning on moving back to Arizona and living by herself; dying is not on her agenda.

Lee wanted to keep her house in Arizona forever, even after she died, she said, so her great grandchildren could come and pick out things that they like. "Keep egg salad in the refrigerator," she instructed me, "or if the eggs go bad, put a *picture* of egg salad instead."

Lee had a simple proof that there was no life after death, "Dad would have given me a blanket when I was cold," she said, "he'd have covered me up." I've interviewed many philosophers who deny an afterlife; I'm not sure any of their arguments, at the end of the day, work better than Mom's.

Once when Aaron helped his grandmother on a matter, she later told me, "I'll remember what Aaron did, even after I'm gone. I don't believe in anything after death, but I'll still remember – and that's hard to do."

Another time, she said, "I could wake up dead."

Though not believing in God or the afterlife, nor being an observant Jew, she was proud of being Jewish and was always loyal to the tribe. She complained to me that my TV show, *Closer To Truth*, featured Christian philosophers but no Jews. I told her, "Mom, there are plenty of Jews; they're the atheist physicists."

One time, years ago in Arizona, I watched Mom take extra time to lock the doors of her house. I asked why the super-security concern that particular day. "Suppose we have robbers," she said. "The house is a mess!"

When starting out on a long drive, she told me to drive carefully. "Don't die and leave me alone," she said, "Or I'll kill you!"

When I explained how to use a speaker phone, she said, "Now I can be a Big Shot like you."

When she was in her early 90s, her lawyer said he would come to her house, but she said, "I'll go the lawyer's office; I don't want him to come to my house – I'll have to feed him cantaloupe." I do not know the deep significance of cantaloupe, but that day it seemed to her that cantaloupe was something you need to feed lawyers.

Arriving with Mom at a motel late at night, both of us starved, but a hopeless two hours after the kitchen had closed, I watched, embarrassed, as she – then in early 90s – tried to convince the manager to find a cook to reopen the kitchen. I told her it was impossible. She told the manager she was almost 100 – she wasn't – that she would lodge a complaint with his boss – she had no idea how to do that, of course. I marveled when the manager brought a respectable dinner to our room.

Whenever she didn't have a reservation at a restaurant that was *totally* booked, she had a way of saying, "I just don't understand; I made a reservation last week" – and half the time, she'd walk right in.

During Super Bowl week in Phoenix, there were no limos available because of a contract with the Super Bowl. She called the concierge at the Biltmore Hotel – she lived in a development on their property – and told him, "I'm living here 24 years, I'm almost 92." The concierge broke the contract and sent a limo.

Mom never liked being short. She could walk on the very tips of her toes, like a ballerina – no one else in the family could do that – and she didn't mind showing off her skill. She wore huge platform heels, like 5 inches at the heel, at least 2 inches at the toe. I never could get her to stop, always worried she'd fall – especially when carrying two bags of groceries from her car. When she went to the doctor for possible heart and hip problems – she listened to doctors – I pointed out the shoes. The doctor took one look and said, "Your heart's fine; those shoes will kill you." When we left, she said, "What do doctors know?" I threw out 14 platform shoes that day, although, when I wasn't watching, she tried to retrieve a few.

Personality-wise, Karen and I, not being easily offended, inherited our father's easy-going genes. Surely, they weren't from Mom. In her early 90s, she got into serial fights with policemen, who said she was at fault in minor traffic accidents. "Do you think I'm a murderer?" she demanded of one policeman.

When he said he had a witness, she said the witness was “in cahoots” with the other party. I finally told Mom that the state had cancelled her driver’s license – when in fact the state had just automatically renewed it for five more years.

Whenever Mom and I had, shall we say, a disagreement – OK, an altercation - over some ‘tiny bit aggressive or inappropriate’ words she might have said to someone, I told her that whatever success I’ve had in life was entirely the result of my inheriting her “intensity genes” – which, I said, due to lack of opportunities for women in her early life, she was now “misdirecting”. She never could figure out if that was a compliment or a criticism.

Many years ago, I told Mom that I would eventually write something about her. She said, “I should write my own book and here’s my first sentence: ‘In my whole life, my two children never said ‘Yes’ to me.” I then said to her, “In my book, I’ll explain why.” “That’s your book,” Mom said, “I’ll write it my way.”

This, from my wife, Dora:

In spite of a difficult start, Lee made me feel very welcome in the family. Many great memories: shopping in Cedarhurst for children’s clothes and ending up at Bee’s Coffee Shop for meat loaf sandwiches, both of us pumping the cook for his recipe. Wonderful memories at Chief Apparel with Kate and Lee, going to B. Altman for fun. However, our relationship was more than shopping sprees. There was always a whirlwind of activities when she was around. I miss her.



This, from my daughter, Daniella, Lee's Granddaughter:

A thousand little joyful moments with Grandma, snapshots of a larger than life personality. Here are some.

Lido beach where we dug for those little crabs.

Her love of nuts, especially peanuts. Devouring them right from the glass jar.

Her cupboard in the kitchen stacked with cans of soups and jars of peanuts - including a fake / joke can that looked and sounded like it contained nuts, but in fact, when you opened it, a fabric snake sprung to life in your face.

Waking us up in the morning by running one of her manicured nails up and down our exposed bare feet until we got out of bed.

Driving from Long Island to bring the best gefilte fish to our front door in Manhattan.

Grandma and Grandpa driving through a heavy snowstorm from Lawrence to the city to see a short play I directed.

Climbing up and down her stairs at Sutton Place for exercise.

The way she walked, straight and fierce. The woman defined what it meant to STRUT.

The way she wouldn't let you leave her house without giving you something to eat. Broke out enough food for a party of 20, even if it was only a party of one. Short of hiring a hitman, there was no stopping her on that one.

There are so many pieces of my grandmother's personality to laugh and cry over, but there is one that keeps popping up in my mind over and over in the last few days: This was a woman who showed up. Nothing could keep her away from the place she wanted to be. And she would be there for you — sometimes whether you liked it or not. If she wanted to be there, she would be there. She was present. She was here. And she was loved.

Lee was incredibly giving and generous to her grandchildren; no effort, no expense, was too much for them. She would always talk about Ross, Karen's son, with great affection, devising new things she could do for him or give to him. She once took Aaron and Adam, ages about 7 and 5, for many weeks over the summer, while their parents, Dora and I, were exhausted from three

children in three years. Grandma Lee would take the two young boys to their favorite hobby store over and over again.

On behalf of Karen Troyan and myself, and our families, we appreciate all who attended the Memorial Service and shared with us, as family and friends, our grief at the death of Lee Kuhn, and our fond reminiscences of her life and her special epoch of time.



It was appropriate to gather at the chapel of the Kahn family.

Lee was devoted to her family, especially her sisters Kate, Betty and Lynn – they were her closest friends, just about her only friends - and they spoke every day, usually multiples times a day. As for their bachelor brother Julius, a distinguished accountant and something of a ladies' man, the four sisters took care of him, if he were still a child.



And, of course, Lee loved dearly all her grandchildren and great grandchildren. In her last years, nothing would brighten her up more than a visit by Zarouhi and Araxi and Hayley – it was amazing how she perked up when they came around.



Many, many times, when I was with Mom, I would FaceTime Karen. Mom would light up, touch the screen. Karen was watching over Mom for years — no modest task — from Dad’s/Lou’s death in 2001 until Mom moved to assisted living in New York in late 2010. (Mom would have scolded me for writing “watching over” — I can almost hear her upbraiding voice.)

Several years ago, when Karen, Michael and Rachel (Karen’s son and daughter in law), flew to NY to visit mom, Mom slipped on the threshold of the bathroom and fell face down. All panicked, to say the least, but Michael helped, the nurse came, and Mom, magically, popped right up, unhurt.

Our special thanks to Felicia Jones, her trusted and loyal companion for many years who was with her almost constantly, including holding her hand and lifting her spirits on the last day.

No matter how expected, Mom’s death still knots my stomach. I recoil as I recall hearing those words of her death, as I stood alone, at night, in a dark gym. No matter how fortunate for a person to live to the shore of 102 years, and how her death can in no way compare with the truly sad things in our world, the enormity of evil, we nonetheless grieve, as grieve we should.

Lee was a smart, dynamic woman who, in a more female-conscious era, may have done wonders. In her own way, Lee Kuhn did do wonders.

Lee was the last living Kahn sibling — it’s the end of an era, as her nephew Harry Sacks put it. Most who attended Lee’s Memorial Service come from the Kahns — in their birth order, Kate, Julius, Betty, Lee and Lynn.

It was good to see so many young people. It is the cycle of life.

Is there deeper meaning?

Mom didn’t think so.

I hope she’s wrong.

Good bye, Mom.

Maybe.