

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ November 2008

Mom's Last Gift

The Very Rev. Dr. George L. W. Werner

On February 12, 1931, during the hardest days of the Depression, 22-year old NYU senior, Lou Werner eloped to Greenwich, Connecticut with 16-year-old Hunter College freshman, Alvine Knell. They had to rush back to New York City so my father could make basketball practice.

The marriage meant that my dad gave up his plans to follow his brother into medical school. Fortunately, he was able to get an interview with the New York City Public School System. His pre-med background and athletic credentials helped him secure a starter position as teacher of health education and coach of various sports.

Mom and dad were shaped by the tough times of the thirties and the extreme rationing of World War II. It wasn't until late 1947 that they could finally afford a car, a two-door Ford. The words to describe them were grateful, content, and frugal.

Dad was a character, and his motto was, "What are we going to save it for, the Senior Prom?" We always had plenty to eat and for trips to the ball park or beach. My favorite Sunday big meal menu was mom's chicken fricassee, rice, sauce, and dumplings. A few years before she died, I asked her if it ever included chicken during the days of the war. She laughed and said, "Usually, but not much."

After they sent my sisters and me off into adulthood and marriage, they were able to take some trips, attend Olympic Games, visit Europe. During his last decade as a teacher, dad was able to participate in an IRA plan. They retired to Florida to be near my mother's parents. Though the world wouldn't have considered them wealthy, they were very happy, very content. My mom still shopped carefully, seeking bargains.

During a visit in the 1980s, they told me that my sisters had agreed that I was to be the designee for estate, power of attorney, and written directives. My parents and I visited their attorney. My mom brought me to her files and showed me everything there was to know about their finances and wishes.

My dad died in 1995, burdened at the end by Alzheimers but still at home, cared for by his amazing wife. Then, in 2002, she called to say that she was moving to Pittsburgh to be near Audrey and me. That's when she gave us her last gift. She explained that she wanted help to do everything possible to make it easy for my sisters and me when she died.

I became her joint partner on all her accounts. She had me round up their investments and bring them together to local Pittsburgh agencies. She had her will, POA, and written directives rewritten to comply with Pennsylvania requirements. I shared all the information with my sisters. When we had family gatherings, I would open the files and bring them and their husbands up to date. With their approval, we placed our son Bill and daughter Chris next in line to be called, since they were the closest, geographically, of family members.

About a year and a half before she died, Alzheimers began to raid her wonderful mind.

I had to move her into a place which specialized in dementia/Alzheimers. Sometimes we connected through music. Sometimes, I would go through one of her albums with her and find her responding. In part, because of all the above, my sisters and I began daily computer chats, bringing us even closer together.

Mom died peacefully in her sleep, a few days before her 93rd birthday. A staff member from Africa who would often pray with her was on duty. The hospice aide was also present and we said our final prayers with Alvine Knell Werner, my wonderful mother.

Because of her openness and trust, the will didn't even have to go to probate. The taxes were minimal, the distribution simple. As she had done our whole lives, she taught us one more lesson of love and care for each of us.

I have seen too many families torn apart by the last days of parents. I have seen too many otherwise bright and healthy friends avoid the discussions of last days. I have tried to help too many overcome the lack of written directives or other such important documents. Our parents provided for us from the time of our birth and continued to do so right up to their deaths. What a beautiful final gift.



Dr. George L.W. Werner is Dean Emeritus of Trinity Cathedral, Pittsburgh, PA, which he served from 1979 to 2000. He was also the 31st President of the House of Deputies, stepping down in 2006. He is a member of the Board and Executive Committee of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center Health System. He was reelected to the Church Pension Fund Board in 2006, a position he previously held from 1976 to 1988. George and Audrey love travel, golf, reading, and especially doting on their extended family which includes four children and their spouses, and twelve grandkids.