

# Meeting Muriel

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT KEN GORMLEY REFLECTS ON HOW HE CAME TO UNCOVER A TREASURE TROVE OF MEMORIES IN ONE CHANCE PHONE CALL

Two weeks after my mom died—shortly after Mother’s Day in 2001—I received an unexpected letter from a woman named Muriel. As Mom’s best friend from the Bronx section of New York City where she grew up, Muriel had been an intriguing figure in our family. Born within months of each other in 1921, they roller-skated in Central Park, attended Walton High and even graduated from Hunter College together.

Muriel moved to the little town of Greenville in the Catskill Mountains of New York, to teach in a country school house. Mom moved to Pittsburgh and taught third grade at St. Anselm’s in Swissvale. They remained kindred spirits, exchanging letters written in majestic longhand, keeping up with births, graduations, family joys and unexpected tragedies, experiencing the cycles of life that only best friends can fully share.

I’d met Muriel only once at age three. I dimly recall being forced to wear a jacket and clip-on bow tie while Mom fussed around the house preparing for what seemed like the arrival of the queen of England. After that festive reunion, I never saw her again.

Muriel had learned of Mom’s death because we’d sent a copy of the obituary to everyone on our parents’ Christmas card list. She wrote me a beautiful letter telling me what a

special, smart, adventurous person Mom had been; Mom would be irreplaceable in her own life.

I reread the letter every day for months. The first Christmas after Mom’s death, I impulsively pulled up the online White Pages for Greenville, N.Y., found a possible number and dialed it.

“Hello?” said the voice. I knew immediately that I had the right number. It sounded exactly like my mom’s voice—the same lilting New York accent, the same lyrical tone that sounded like a form of spoken poetry. I stayed on the phone for an hour with Muriel, just to hear her voice.

Over the following years, I sent her updates on our entire family. Pictures. Added her to our own Christmas card list. I start calling to make sure she was OK and to learn more about Mom’s childhood in New York. In 2017, during one of our conversations, Muriel asked: “Is there any chance you’d come to the Catskills one day?” Her own husband had died a decade earlier. They had no children. She and her older sister, Doris, still lived in the house together. “We stopped driving to Florida after we turned 90,” Muriel said. “Pittsburgh might be a bit too long a hike.”

As spring arrived, I called Muriel to report that we’d scheduled a Duquesne alumni event for Albany and I could





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swing down and visit her for lunch the first Thursday of the month.

“Oh my, I don’t think I’ll be free then,” said Muriel. I was crushed.

“I’ve been looking forward to this for weeks, Muriel,” I said. “Are you going out of town?”

“No,” she said. “Doris likes to have Meals on Wheels for lunch on Thursdays—that’s meatloaf day. But you could come after 1 o’clock. I have plenty of cookies for dessert.”

When I arrived in Greenville, along with Jim Miller, senior advisor to the president for Advancement and fellow traveler, I was struck by the strong connection to times gone by. The Catskill Mountains rose up in a beautiful panoramic scene around us. Quaint summer cottages were still tucked along the road, where proprietors (including my wife’s family) once ran old-fashioned “resorts” for visitors from the big cities. Modest homes lined State Route 32 where Muriel’s tiny white house occupied a lot across from a shop that sold hiking gear.

When she answered the door, I thought I was staring at my mom’s twin sister. She was a slight lady, only five feet tall in heeled shoes, with white hair and a kinetic sparkle in her eyes. Now 96, Muriel was caring for her sister, Doris, who was 98 and confined to a wheelchair. After chatting in the kitchen so Doris could meet me before her nap, we went outside to enjoy the sunshine and crisp air of the Catskills, sharing cookies and lemonade on the porch.

“I remember that day we visited Pittsburgh,” Muriel said. “You and your brothers were lined up on the piano bench with white shirts and little bow ties, all spic-and-span. I can still picture those shiny faces. You’re a little older now but luckily you have your mother’s features, so you turned out pretty well.”

For an hour, I listened to Muriel tell stories about visiting my mom on Sedgewick Avenue and listening to my grandma play ragtime songs on the piano; accompanying my mom, skates slung over their shoulders, to ice skate in the nearby Van Cortlandt Park; and serving as a part-time secretary for my grandpa, who worked for the city’s civil service department.

Muriel pulled out a bundle of envelopes wrapped in a rubber band: It was a collection of letters and colorful cards bearing my mom’s distinctive cursive, which Muriel had saved over the years.

“I want you to have these,” she said.

As I hugged Muriel goodbye, heading off to Albany for our alumni gathering, I stashed the precious letters in my briefcase and guarded them like a Brinks truck driver protecting a cargo of gold bars.

Back home, a wave of emotion flooded over me as I savored each one. There were letters and cards about my mom and dad’s 50th wedding anniversary, that I could picture perfectly; my own wedding to Laura in Ringwood, N.J., in 1986; the birth of our first baby, Carolyn; the death of our family’s miniature schnauzer, Hegel, which Mom grieved for months; driver’s tests; tooth extractions; pictures of grandchildren that Mom tucked into cards, making it a veritable time capsule of family memories.

When I called Muriel to rave about the letters, she wasn’t feeling so great: Doris had just been moved to a nursing home and likely needed to stay there. Neighbors were driving Muriel to the facility several days a week, but she couldn’t stop worrying. “I say a prayer every night,” Muriel told me softly. “I say, ‘Please God let me live another day so Doris won’t have to live alone.’”

Muriel was doubly upset, she confessed, because she hadn’t finished the letter that she’d started and stopped, multiple times—she wanted to thank me for the visit and for the sparkling Duquesne pewter tray I’d given her.

“I’ll finish it soon,” she promised.

As of this writing, Doris is still in the nursing home, and Muriel still hasn’t sent me that letter. But, it doesn’t matter. The letters she already entrusted to me are the most incredible gift ever. And spending time with her has been like having a magical opportunity to spend time with my mom again.

I’m already looking forward to calling Muriel on Mother’s Day. Just to thank her, and to hear the sound of that beautiful, lyrical voice. ♦