

Tribute: Joyce Ellen Parsonson

Born: 11 October 1933

Died: 27 January 2019

Joy was born Joyce Ellen Southgate in Leyton on the 11th October 1933 – her father, Jim, was a supervisor for the electric company and her mother, Alice, turned her hand to various jobs – including working in shops, and as a carer. Joy had an adopted younger brother, Jim - who died some years ago - but who was, from what we can gather of her childhood, the typical “annoying little brother”.

Joy’s childhood was somewhat free and easy – her Mum, Alice, wasn’t one for routine or discipline; and this most likely shaped Joy’s approach to life – it’s no secret that she grew up to be a bit of a “rule breaker”!

Joy’s schooldays were unremarkable – and she looked back on them as a bit limiting; she recalled looking at onion cells through a microscope as the only highlight of her science lessons. But she was very talented at sport, and won a scholarship to a sports college – only to have that ambition thwarted as her mum discouraged her from going because she would have had to live away from home.

With the outbreak of the war Joy and her adopted brother Jim were evacuated for a time to Lancashire – this would have been when she was seven or eight years old.

Once back home, as a young girl Joy’s love of sport continued – she enjoyed going to watch speedway racing locally with her mates, and later she’d go with her Dad on Saturdays to support Leyton Orient at their home matches.

After leaving school, Joy worked for Cable and Wireless in London – when asked what she did there, she’d be known to reply: “looked out of the window”. And her ability to get up to mischief and do as she pleased was apparent here – because if she happened to be looking out of that window and saw a protest or a march of some sort going on (as was sometimes the case in London) she’d pop out in her lunch time and join in. It didn’t matter what it was all about – she joined in just for the fun of it.

Joy would like to go ice-skating in Forest Gate, and it's on one of these occasions that we think she met her husband to be - Don, a motor mechanic who went on to run a number of garages of his own. The couple married on the 22nd of December 1951 and Joy gave birth to Chris a year later, and then Lin a couple of years after that.

Joy and Don were married for some 60 years until, sadly, Don died five years ago. When Joy's health began to fail, Don looked after her at home for quite some time; and when she moved to a care home he visited almost every day. I'm sure that his devotion at this stage of her life meant a lot to Joy.

When they first started out Joy and Don lived in Vicarage Road, Leyton, but not long afterwards the family moved to Goodman Road – just two doors away from Joy's mum and dad. They were there until the early 1990s, when they moved to Maylandsea in Essex.

Once she was married, Joy didn't really have a conventional job – she was a full time mum. But she did what was known as “outdoor work” – putting her creative talents to good use by taking in sewing jobs and making cuddly toys, particularly around Christmas time to raise a bit of extra cash. And Joy absolutely loved babies and children, so later on she became a registered child minder – which I'm sure she must have found very fulfilling.

At the age of 27 Joy became very ill with cancer of the womb. She was treated by a young surgeon performing his very first hysterectomy operation – she never forgot his name: Dr Hall. This would have been in 1960, when medicine wasn't so advanced as nowadays and the chances of a successful outcome were, I think, put at about 50/50; but Joy pulled through – testament not only to Dr Hall's skill, but also to Joy's fortitude and strength. Joy was left unable to have more children, a devastating blow at the time given her love of babies and children – and a reminder perhaps that it's rare for a life to go untouched by loss and sadness of some sort.

The events in people's lives are important – the births, the marriages, the deaths, the occasions, the good times and the tough times. They are milestones along the way and they give us a sense of time and place, and the things that happened during someone's life. But of equal, if not more, importance is the character of that person – what they were like, the things that they took pleasure from and the memories that they leave. The overriding sense of the vast majority of Joy's life is of one lived to the full, doing what she wanted to do – so let's take a few moments to remember some of those things.

Sport, of course, was a major part of Joy's life. You name it - tennis, cricket, snooker and golf particularly, but any sport generally – she loved to watch it all. She spent much of her adult life engrossed in some event or other on the television – often sleeping during the day so she could stay up overnight if that's when something was televised from some far flung part of the world. As children both Chris and Lin remember Wimbledon fortnight being sacrosanct – not much conversation to be had then!

Joy wasn't just a spectator though – in the 1980s she took up golf, playing regularly at the course at Pickett's Lock with her friend Julie. She also took up keep fit around the same time – going to classes with her mum Alice and her daughter Chris. I think the tutor was quite chuffed to have three generations in the same class – and Joy kept it up for quite some time.

As well as this, Joy's creativity and skill at all sorts of crafts was quite amazing. The list is almost endless. She was a fantastic seamstress – making all sorts of costumes for Chris and Lin when they did dance shows and festivals as youngsters, sitting up half the night if necessary. Bows were hand embroidered, sequins were sown on by hand and every design was unique. Joy could take a basic pattern and make it her own - her imagination was equal to her talent. She would also make more everyday clothes on the sewing machine, and she was an expert knitter.

Joy's grandchildren were beneficiaries of this wonderful ability too. When they were young Joy would make Joelle and Tyler all manner of self designed soft toys and personalised jumpers featuring their favourite things. She also made a beautiful set of Beatrix Potter animals, which went on display in a wooden cabinet made by Don.

Joy was very handy at DIY – she did the bulk of the household decorating over the years. Lin and Chris have an abiding memory of coming home from school one day to find their Mum balanced, just about, on the mantle piece clinging on for dear life to the chimney breast! She'd somehow got up there when decorating but got herself stranded and couldn't get back down!

She was good at constructing things too; cupboards and cabinets were built, crazy paving laid in the garden and memorably a pigeon loft erected – the use for which we'll come onto shortly. When she was child minding she also built a slide, which was used by the youngsters she looked after – and later put to use by the family's pet tortoise, who shuffled up it and glided back down again. The tortoise is alive and well by the way – and is currently having its winter nap in Lin's loft.

Joy's talents didn't end there. The whole family did pottery at evening classes, and Don even made a potter's wheel out of the drum of an old spin dryer so they could make things at home. And after watching a TV programme – “Paint Along With Nancy” - Joy got hooked on painting, taught herself the techniques and displayed a real talent. She had a prolific output and, as well as canvas, she'd use anything vaguely rectangular – cereal boxes, cardboard, hardboard – as a base for her oil paintings.

Another facet of Joy was her problem solving abilities – no doubt this was linked to her creativity, and she took much pleasure from things like crosswords and jigsaw puzzles. Her talents in this direction had more practical uses too – give her a roll of duct tape and a few random bits and bobs and she could fix, or make, almost anything. The problem of an itchy back, for instance, was solved with a backscratcher made from an old fork attached to a long stick! She would “up-cycle” things rather than dispose of them before it became rather fashionable to do so – and good for her.

No tribute to Joy would be complete without mentioning her love for animals and for the outdoors – the natural world held great appeal for her. The family always had a pet dog – and a firm favourite was Sally, a boxer pup bought from Chris' and Lin's Post Office savings while the family were on holiday on the Isle of Wight. Sally went on to breed, and they kept the youngest of the litter – starting many years of boxer dog ownership, which brought much happiness to Joy.

As well as the dogs, there were rabbits, guinea pigs (for which Joy built hutches) and of course the family tortoise...and pigeons, which is where Joy's construction of the pigeon loft comes in. Don's business partner kept pigeons – but those that were, shall we say, not of a good quality were destined to have their necks wrung. This wasn't acceptable - especially to Chris and Lin - so Joy built the loft and the pigeons were saved that fate and were well looked after.

She took in an injured street bird – given the name “Boyzo” – as well as a couple of fan-tailed doves, and even a baby wood pigeon. She definitely had an endearing soft spot for waifs and strays – and all those creatures enjoyed a better life because of her.

Joy loved to be outdoors – walking the dog in the forest, or going on camping holidays in the UK to Scotland, Wales, Devon, Cornwall and Hayling Island on the south coast. And, ingenious as ever, during the summer months Joy would rig up the television set, complete with cardboard boxes to shade the screen from the sun's glare, so she could watch her favourite sporting events whilst sitting outside – the best of all worlds!

The only overseas trip that Joy had was in the 1970s, when for several weeks she and Don visited Lin while she was teaching in Barbados. That must have been quite an adventure for Joy, and she really enjoyed seeing all the tropical flora and fauna – making the most of it by rising early to avoid the heat and then, when not sight seeing, relaxing in shade and the sea breeze. What a lovely memory.

Joy was happy in her own company and wasn't a great one for going out, although there were family trips to the cinema – and she did like the James Bond films. She also enjoyed going to the annual London School of Contemporary Dance show at Sadlers Wells, and to sporting events involving tennis or gymnastics; and there were family trips out to London during the summer holidays, to the various parks, and to Oxford Street and to Trafalgar Square – not surprisingly to feed the pigeons!

In terms of her character, Joy was her own woman – strong minded and a bit of a rebel. Her motto was “live and let live” – and that's how she lived her life. So if she wanted to do something, so long as it didn't harm others – she did it. And what other people might think didn't really worry her. Joining a protest march in her lunch break for the fun of it; smuggling the pet guinea pigs into hospital to see Lin when she'd had her appendix removed aged 10; leaving her footprints in newly laid cement like a big kid – these are just some examples of what she got up to.

And this approach to life was extended to her daughters and led to more than one embarrassing situation for Chris and Lin – and let's face it, that is part of a parent's job! So she would encourage the girls to walk along narrow walls or to practice their gymnastics moves on the handrails on trains if they were empty enough; or in bus shelters whether other people were there or not. And because of her insistence on her dogs being always included in things, a boxer was nearly always in tow – to the extent that at Chris' wedding Joy wouldn't budge on the issue, and the compromise was that she had to sit at the back of the room with the dog during the service.

And Chris and Lin have never forgotten the time that Joy discovered the tights she'd been wearing the day before poking out of the leg of the trousers she was wearing. In full public view she proceeded to extract the tights from the trouser leg – out and out the hosiery came despite the loud protests of her daughters. She carried out the role of “embarrassing mum” with some commitment!

But she also had a serious and unwavering commitment to her children – and indeed her grandchildren. This devotion was a constant feature of Joy’s life, and was perhaps her hallmark. She wanted nothing more than for Chris and Lin to have a good education and do well; and she was behind them every step of the way. She was a very dedicated and giving mother – generous of spirit, of time and energy, and of love.

The family didn’t have money to spare but what she did have Joy used to ensure that Chris and Lin could enjoy experiences like tennis, gymnastics and dancing. They would go to regular lessons and clubs, and Joy would accompany them on the bus and train rides – and most of all encourage them to get the most from all these outings. And as we’ve heard, she made clothes and costumes for their various activities. In short, Chris and Lin could not have wished for a more supportive mother – she was such a big part of their lives, and that is very much part of Joy’s legacy.

We’ve heard just how much Joy loved babies and children, so she was absolutely overjoyed when her grandchildren arrived. She was very involved in their lives from the word go – not only making all those soft toys and jumpers and so on – but as they grew up never missing events or occasions, be they school plays or shows, birthdays or family occasions. In short, she was simply a marvelous nana and Joelle and Tyler brought her much happiness.

All of these things - this life story, this personality - go to make up the unique and special person that Joy was; and, along I’m sure with many other memories you have, they leave an enduring picture of a woman who lived such a fulfilling life and who meant such a lot to those close to her.

In her late seventies Joy’s health showed signs of decline with the onset of dementia – but before that uncompromising disease took hold she had said words to the effect of “if I ever get like that put me in a home”. Here was Joy’s strength of character writ large – she did not want to burden her loved ones, and she wanted that stage of her life, just like the rest of her life, to be on her terms.

So it was that she moved to Brewster House care home in Maldon, where she spent three years before transferring to Longmead Court nursing home in Braintree five years ago.

The family would like to thank the staff at both establishments for the care that Joy received – she was very well looked after, and she was as content as she could be given the circumstances. The staff at Longmead Court remember Joy with affection – and that is a nice way to be remembered.

We shall not dwell on those final few years - in the context of a lifespan of 85 years that last period of Joy's life does not define her; far better to remember her as the independent minded, strong and vibrant woman that she was throughout the majority of those 85 years.

Joy died peacefully in her sleep early on the morning of 27th January. She made her mark on this world, and was much loved – and will be much missed.