

A Celebration of the Life of

Sylvia Marguerite Roberts
12 September 1934 – 20 August 2024

11 September 2024, Islington Cemetery Burial Chapel
Celebrant: Kate Hobson



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Sylvia Roberts was a much loved and greatly missed mother to Mark, and grandmother to Amy, Kathryn and Kyle. The Roberts family suffered many painful bereavements over time. Sylvia outlived both her younger brothers, her husband Al and three of her children – not only Ian and Jenn but also a baby, Neil, who survived for only a few days. But Sylvia, despite the heartache and her own episodes of serious bad health, never allowed them to consume her life. To Mark she seemed indestructible. And when she died he felt that the driving force of the family was gone, leaving a space impossible to fill.

Sylvia was a realist. She may have feared for the way she might die, but she didn't fear death itself. She spoke to Mark about what would happen afterwards, and she made sure that her affairs were in order. She believed we have only one life on this earth, and that we should live it to the full. And she did this, in spades. As Mark says, she not only embraced it, she drank from it.

Sylvia was born into a working class family in Peterborough to James and Birdie Weekes. Her parents had moved up there from London, but when she was two the family moved back, and here she stayed. She had two younger brothers, James and Vic, with whom she had good relationships throughout their lives.

Sylvia's CV is impressive, especially when you realise that she failed her eleven-plus and went to a Secondary Modern, which taught basic training and practical skills rather than academic subjects. She left school at 15 to train as a nurse – at least partly because accommodation was provided – her brothers both joined the military services for much the same reason. It wasn't unusual for children of that age to live away from home and earn their own money, and it clearly engendered in Sylvia a lifelong sense of self-reliance and hard graft. And to that was added a natural steel.

Sylvia registered as a nurse in 1955 and continued to work and train continuously until she retired. In the process she forged a career for herself based on intelligence and perseverance. She may not have known exactly where she was headed in the early days, but she took every opportunity to learn and develop her skills, gaining her certificate of Qualification in Social Work in 1978 and as a Systemic Psychotherapist in 1992, allowing her to register as a member of the United Kingdom Council of Psychotherapy.

She spent 10 years working as a staff nurse before becoming a school nurse for a couple of years while the children were at home. Al was often on call at night as part of his job as a GPO telephone engineer, so Sylvia couldn't also do nights. Juggling career and family is never easy, and although Sylvia's mum stepped in, Sylvia herself just wasn't around for the children as much as the stay-at-home mums of many of her children's friends.

Mark and his siblings noticed other differences too. While many parents considered their role to be primarily one of providing and protecting, Sylvia took a different view. She was liberal and broad-minded, and while being very aware that the balance of power weighed in her favour, she treated her children as adults, encouraging them to discuss, develop their own views and present cogent arguments. They could talk about anything – no subject was off limits.

She herself had no compunction about saying what she thought, and considered it healthy. She had no second thoughts either, and if it led to a falling out with someone, her attitude was, 'We've had that and now we can move on'. Mostly, she was proved right, but occasionally it did lead to longer-term rifts.

Although Sylvia liked things to be done her way, she didn't believe in laying down the law as far as the children's behaviour was concerned – it was more about instilling in them general principles and letting them make up their own minds after that. One advantage for them was that things were more relaxed at home than in other households, so as Mark, Ian and Jenn got older, lots of their friends wanted to be over at their house, where they were largely left to their own devices.

All of Sylvia's jobs had one thing in common – helping people whose lives had been turned upside down by sickness, trauma, and other challenging life situations. From nursing she moved into a job as an Education Welfare Officer in Inner London, negotiating with schools and families to get children accepted back into school and feel happier. Three years later she moved into probation work, and for nine years worked with people with a wide range of offending behaviour and personal problems.

Next was 12 years during which, as a Psychiatric Social Worker in a local authority Child Guidance Clinic, she supported children and adults with mental health and social deprivation issues. While there, she was promoted to Senior Practitioner and initiated and developed a clinic-based Family Therapy Team, setting up and running six-week Parent Training Groups on 'How To Talk So Kids Will Listen, How to Listen So Kids Will Talk'. She had a clear understanding that early intervention can help change a course of behaviour. Her final post was as a Systemic Family Therapist in a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, where she stayed for seven years.

As a professional she had to find ways to get things done, helped enormously by her tenacity and no-nonsense approach. When Sylvia took up a cause, she stuck to it. If she was on your side she was a very effective ally: but if not, she could be an implacable opponent. But she also had the ability to see past immediate conflicts to the wider good.

She was endlessly curious about life; always inquiring, always pursuing enlightenment; always ready to try something new, particularly outside the mainstream. She read voraciously all her life, but a high point was when she enrolled at the Open University in the late 60s or early 70s and discovered the joys of academic study that she'd missed when younger. Mark sees this as a period when her reading became more directed, particularly towards politics.

Having taken up a feminist left-wing stance, she was drawn into several campaigns in the 80s including CND. When she went to join the Greenham Common Peace Camp, she wore her rainbow tights. She was heavily involved in the Labour Party for many years and agreed with many of Jeremy Corbyn's views. Local party members had a lot of affection for Sylvia who describe her as 'a great comrade' and 'a great spirit'. She was feisty, but in a calm way – she didn't shout, she didn't 'lose it'.

By then her horizons had widened in many other ways. For her, London was the only place to live as it gave her access to all its cultural delights. She made the most of the galleries and museums, and particularly experimental and alternative theatre. She didn't reject the West End though, and was quite happy to take the children to shows such as the Lion King.

She and Al loved travelling and went all over the world, even to the Antarctic. After it became too difficult for Al, she continued to take trips with friends. Mark remembers her being very fond of Vietnam.

Exposure to different cuisines and increased availability of interesting ingredients spurred her to try new tastes in her own cooking. She was an excellent cook, and she loved a party. Mark remembers so many at Redston Road where Sylvia could be her flamboyant self. She was very stylish, both in dress and décor, and loved to have a laugh, put on some Reggae and dance.

Sylvia was a force of nature – strong, resilient, combative, indomitable. She was her own unique self. She didn't believe in the Christian version of the afterlife, but she did believe in spiritual connections, which can be found in both expected and unexpected places. She will be remembered for her strength, perseverance, her thirst for life, her love and her desire to make the world a better place.