

Mary Gay

Mary Gay passed away on 3 October 2010.

Eulogy by son, Andrew Gay, at Memorial Service at the Cathedral of St Michael and St George

On behalf of my dear sister Angela and our whole family we welcome you all to this celebration of Mary Gay – our beloved Mother – to complete the picture of a life well lived and well finished. I will not be brief – if I had a thousand years there would still be more to say about this blessed woman.

There are two places of worship that always meant a lot to our family – the St Andrew's College Chapel, where I was confirmed and married and where one of our children was baptised, and then this wonderful Cathedral. My father served this diocese for many years as a lay minister and has played the organ here many times. For years we went to the family service every Sunday before we used to go riding at Bathurst. This building is in our blood. It was one of those early family services that we arrived late and were seated at the back for once. I asked my father for the number of the next hymn. He looked at me askance and asked why I could not read it from the board – the self same board we see here today. It was a blur to me. Worried, he took me the next day to be examined and we found I was incredibly short sighted. I was twelve years old. When my glasses were finally delivered it was as if a whole new world was opened up to me – everything was brought into the most incredible sharp focus. I stumbled down High Street just amazed how my eyes had been opened.

My mother's passing has done the same to our view of her life – focussed us all on what she did and all she achieved and we now see it in a new clear light. Most of you knew her well in her year. Friends stuck to her like glue and each one benefited from the experience. Mary had a very tough beginning – remember she was born before the Great War and “the times they were a changing”. We are not sure what happened to her birth mother but, just after her father came back from the war, the classic evil step mother entered the scene. Mum may have told some of you the story but the abuse she experienced laid the foundation to what made her what she was. She was denied formal education to look after her younger siblings and she had a life of sheer misery and serfdom until rescued by her very strict grandparents. Her grandfather was a tailor to the prince of Wales. Her fiery sister Millie (who married Johnny Norton here in Grahamstown) ran away and Marie the elder daughter married and escaped and Mary was left to bear the brunt.

This is the reason that mum clung to the whole ideal of family and love but it might well have stifled her ambition and potential. Mum was a victim of her time. Remember she was born soon after powered flight began and lived 41 years after man landed on the moon. It was a difficult enough step to take to be an emancipated woman in the nineteen thirties even before two seismic events occurred in her life.

He met her John on a train – we used to tease her that she had been picked up - and then there was the outbreak of the Second World War. With John by her side and a truly lovely little daughter in tow they had to endure the horrors of war. Angela slept under the dining room table in a drawer during the height of the blitz. The maternity home where I was to be born was hit by a V1 German rocket the week before I was due. When she tried to catch a train to sister Millie's home to have me the train was strafed by a Messerschmitt with her unable to lie down with the other passengers. I duly appeared in Birmingham weighing 10 and a half pounds – a weight recently described by a friend as “being born packed and ready for school”. I was trouble from the start!

Faced with on-going rationing after the war dad and mum decided to travel somewhere safe and in 1947 we came to Grahamstown where she happily lived for the rest of her days. Those were pioneering times and for the fragrant flower from south London it must have been a wide eyed journey. Angela was eight and remembered seeing white bread and butter for the first time – the effects of the war had lingered on in Europe.

One especially endearing feature was her effect on young people. Angela and my friends often came to the house when we were young and she adopted them all. I have numerous messages from our friends children and even their children's children who just loved to come in and chat and listen to all the stories from her quite remarkable life. Every grandchild and great grandchild had a one to one relationship with her and each one was different.

Tony called her "my nan" because – and I quote: "as it made me feel that she belonged to me and no one else... selfish I know. This truth is that she was loved, adored and respected by so many over her long life I can't even imagine how many hearts she has touched. It is such a daunting thought that I would compare it to looking up at the stars and trying to count all that I see. The name Mary Gay is so well known that it will resonate through the ages.... But for me it is "My" Nan that will never be forgotten".

Old boys from the school, my friends, Angela's friends, mum's friends - nobody passed through Grahamstown without popping in to see her for a sprinkling of "MMFD" – the Mary's Magic Fairy Dust.

Then there are the thanks to too many people to even be able to mention who were her friends, who nursed her and dad when they were ill, who shopped for her, who played bridge with her, who fed her jokes, who fetched and carried her, who popped into see her and chat. They represent the caring community that make Grahamstown and especially Brookshaw a truly precious place. We thank you all from the bottom of our huge family heart for the peace and companionship and happiness you gave her even after her John passed on 11 years ago.

Our family's tomorrow is about living without Mary Gay but we know in our hearts that her greatest gift is to have helped us to learn so much from her for our tomorrows. We humbly ask you, our Heavenly Father, to take and bless the pure soul of Mary Jael Gay and give to her the peace that such a rare human spirit so richly deserves.