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David McGrath: My mother's ability to find the good in all was a true gift



Gertrude McGrath, left, passes silverware to Ronnie Booth at a New Year's Eve party in 1960. (David McGrath)



By [David McGrath](#) | Special to the Tribune

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“Ronnie should play ‘The \$64,000 Question,’” my mother said about our Evergreen Park neighbor, whom she thought could be a champion on the then-popular quiz show.

As a kid in the 1950s, I had not thought of Mrs. Veronica Booth as a distinct human being. She was one of the many adults in the neighborhood, all of whom seemed intimidatingly the same to me.

But as mom described how Ronnie was a mother, a teacher, a film buff and the one “gal” in their group they relied on for knowing which movies they might like and which ones were on the Catholic church’s “condemned” list, I got a new picture in my head of our neighbor as a blonde, smiling contestant being applauded on TV.

It was the same with respect to Mrs. Doyle, another in the battalion of grownups. “Geraldine is a peach,” my mother said. “She never takes a dime for doing everyone’s hair. Just asks for a hug.”

Which got me wondering if love was better than money. A puzzle, for sure, since I was 12 and hardly a deep thinker, reflecting mostly on baseball or which candy bar I might buy with the change I “accidentally” found in my brother’s coat pocket.

Most mornings, my father, dressed in a T-shirt and leaning over a mug of coffee at the breakfast table, clearly enjoyed listening to my mother, her legs crossed and clutching her own coffee as she chatted about the Brackens and the Russels and the Landels and the Gramers.

I remember doubting that the funny and slightly mean gossip on TV shows like “I Love Lucy” and “The Honeymooners,” was believable as I listened to my mother, who would only ever glorify our neighbors. Ted Iverson was praised as funny and generous, while Becky DiBennardi was “a saint” and a devout and dedicated volunteer at St. Bernadette’s.

I used to imagine her sitting at the annual New Year’s Eve party, wide-eyed, beaming, as if in awe of the apparently gifted and rare collection of individuals in our neighborhood.

But were they? Was it possible for so many people inhabiting a single square block in a Chicago suburb to be geniuses and stars?

“Jackie is stunning,” said my mother, describing Mrs. Dugal’s silky hair and perfect make-up, a woman she lauded as never being without earrings even in the middle of the day. I was vaguely cognizant that Mrs. Dugal was pretty but had not realized that being attractive required effort or skill.

According to my mother, Ginny Burge’s house was immaculate, her taste in furnishings like that of someone in Beverly Hills. Stella Remiasz had a magical green thumb, her rock garden akin to those found in Paris. Nurse Peggy Mitterman was “an angel of mercy” who miraculously appeared whenever there was an emergency.

Gertrude McGrath was not naive. She'd had her share of heartache, with three siblings dying long before their time and the ongoing strain of dad's hit-or-miss sales commissions not keeping up with the bills.

But at some point in her life, following the Depression and a war that felt like the end of the universe, she made a conscious decision to reject cynicism and focus on the beauty and light in other people.

She did it for us, of course, to model a positive perspective for her eight children that would enrich our own relationships and jump-start our dreams.

My mom died 12 years ago, and I especially miss her on Mother's Day. Her belief in and admiration for fellow human beings was a gift she bestowed on me and my siblings.

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A mother's capacity for love is a well deep enough for more than just her children, quenching the lives of everyone she touches. It's why mothers everywhere deserve our deepest gratitude.

Happy Mother's Day to all!

David McGrath, an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage, is the author of "Far Enough Away," a collection of Chicagoland stories. He will be inducted into the Evergreen Park Hall of Fame on May 4. Email him at mcgrathd@dupage.edu.