

Eulogy and Tribute for Audrey Ford

(by Stuart Ford, her son. A shorter version of this eulogy and tribute was delivered at Audrey's memorial service on 9th January 2020).

Welcome again from Judith and me, and thank you all for coming. Thanks to those who have driven long distances to be here. Judith and I thank you all particularly that you would honour our Mum by being here. She would have been chuffed to bits to see you all here.

Mum is survived by Judith and me, one granddaughter living in Texas, one great granddaughter living in Barcelona, and three more great granddaughters also living in Texas. You can see their names in the program. We will be having another memorial for Mum later in the year in Texas so that many of the distant relatives can attend.

I mention Mum's descendants because one of Mum's greatest joys, greatest priorities and most frequent talking points was her family. She loved them all, unconditionally. She didn't get to see her American side very often, but when she did, she spread joy and happiness among them all. And she was beloved by them.

Mum was born Audrey May Wright in 1927 in London. Mum spent her early life growing up in India, where her Dad worked at a British Army munitions factory.

Mum's early life experiences in India shaped her life to come. Throughout her life, India was a talking point that came up early whenever she met somebody new. People were fascinated with her India experiences.

By the time Mum was about 14 years old, hostilities in the Second World War made living in India no longer safe for British families. Mum was evacuated to Britain, but her native London was no safer at that time either. Mum, her mother Florence and her sister Valerie saw out the rest of the war living in Torquay in Devonshire.

Mum's family reunited in London at the end of the war. They lived in Eltham in South East London. Mum worked in Central London for the Prudential Insurance company. She met Lionel Ford, Judith's and my Dad, at a dinner dance in 1952. They were married in Eltham in 1953.

Dad was a Health Service administrator. He had started his career in the NHS after he was demobilized from the Navy when the war ended. He and Mum moved first to Cromer in Norfolkshire, where Dad started his first real hospital management job. Then they moved to Keighley in Yorkshire, where I was born. Then on to Keresley in Warwickshire, where Judith was born. And then finally, in 1962, to Haywards Heath in Sussex.

I say "finally" because Mum and Dad never moved again. Mum, Dad, Judith and I all lived together in the village of Ardingly in Sussex through the 60s and early 70s. In

the early days, the house went by a house name instead of a number. It was called "Jalsford", an acronym of all of our initials and then our last name.

Mum went back to the workforce somewhere around 1968. She started doing general clerical work at St. Paul's secondary school in Haywards Heath. Later, probably around 1974, Mum started work at East Sussex County Council as an accounts payable clerk in the motor vehicles department. Mum stayed with this later-life career until her own retirement in the late 1980s. Mum did very well. By the time she retired, Mum was supervising and leading the accounts payable division.

It was also during this time that Mum separated from and eventually became divorced from my Dad. Mum remained single the rest of her life.

Mum moved to Woodingdean, near Brighton in Sussex, after she and Dad parted ways. It fulfilled her lifelong dream to live near the sea. You could see the sea from her front room in Woodingdean. She later moved even closer to the sea, to a flat in Telscombe Cliffs, also near Brighton. You could walk to the beach from her flat.

Mum spent many of her first years after retirement looking after her ailing sister and parents. Mum was tireless, making countless trips to Eltham in South East London to care for them. Mum's sister and parents all passed away relatively close to one another in the early 1990s.

Mum's retirement years then moved into a period where she spent much time with Judith and me, and also with her grandkids in America. Judith was able to visit Mum in Brighton, and Mum would come down to Wales to visit Judith.

I was living permanently in America by this time. Mum would come once a year to America and stay for several weeks. The kids loved "Grandma Audrey", as they would call her. Her exploits as the "social little British lady" in Texas company are legendary. Mum also travelled within the United States when she was there. Among her trips, she went to Las Vegas, to Branston (the home of Dolly Parton), to Wisconsin, to Atlanta (to see her schoolgirl friend Jean, from India days), and to Mexico. Mum reveled in her role as the "little old British lady" as she traveled, and was beloved wherever she went.

Mum stopped coming to America annually after her trip in 2006. Her health was deteriorating and the journey was becoming too much for her. Judith still got to visit her, however. I started to travel more frequently to visit her in Britain. I tried to bring one or other of the kids whenever I could. Mum always talked about how much she missed us all.

Mum did make two additional trips to the US in the following years. She came in 2009 after I had remarried and moved to Neskowin, in Oregon. Our house overlooks the Pacific Ocean. As noted above, Mum loved being by the sea, and we have some wonderful photos of Mum on this trip smiling on the beach.

Mum visited the US again in 2013, but poor health while travelling made this trip unsuccessful. Mum was very disappointed. She had ambitions to visit her Texas relatives during this trip, and was unable to do so. Poor health prevented Mum from visiting the US again.

Tragedy struck in 2015 when Mum fell and broke her hip in her flat in Telscombe Cliffs. Although Judith became a stalwart carer and advocate for Mum, it became clear that Judith would not be able to do the job properly while Mum was in Sussex and Judith was in South Wales. Mum agreed in 2016 to give up her flat and move into a care home in Chepstow, to be nearer Judith. As Mum's health deteriorated further, Mum moved to The Orchard in Ganarew in order to receive the appropriate level of care. Mum was at the Orchard until she passed away last month.

So what can be said about Audrey Ford in tribute? Mum was socially outgoing, gregarious at times. She was generous to a fault. She had a mischievous streak and a wicked sense of humour. In America, Mum loved telling stories -- usually about India, and about "when Stuart was a little boy". She loved to compare what Americans call things and what British people call the same things. As you can imagine, the American listeners loved it and gave Mum all the attention she could handle.

In fact, Mum loved being around people, especially her family. I think it not an exaggeration to say Mum thought about her family almost constantly -- and nearly always in a positive way.

In life, Mum took people as she found them. She listened to what they said, and often took it at face value just because they said it. Mum pre-judged no mistrust in people. As a result, Mum often displayed a refreshing innocence and lack of cynicism harking back, perhaps, to an earlier and less complicated time.

For me, however, I will always remember Mum for her capacity to forgive. I am not saying this just because she was my Mum. I am saying this because it is the absolute truth ... Mum was the most forgiving person I ever met. Her ability to let stuff go was uncanny. She could let go of anything, and almost right away. No matter how hurtful or totally unreasonable. She simply didn't want to live in a state of resentment towards anyone or anything. So she chose not to.

I don't make this observation trivially. When I became a Christian several years ago, I came to understand firsthand the importance of forgiveness. Not just as a religious concept. Regardless of one's religious beliefs, our humanity does not do well when we hang on to resentment. It leads to bitterness. And in the Christian world, forgiveness breaks the chains that bind you to all life's baggage that's been weighing you down.

I had to learn this. However, it seems Mum understood this instinctively. She understood that forgiveness is not a gift you give to the person who wronged you -- it's a gift you give yourself. And I will always follow her example in this regard.

This tribute would not be complete without special mention to my sister Judith, and to the staff at Ganarew. Judith's tireless work as both carer and health advocate for Mum added years to Mum's life, and life to Mum's years. And, in the end, Mum passed peacefully with Judith at her side. Enough really can't be said about Judith's incredible support in Mum's later years. I will always be grateful to Judith for what she did for Mum.

I say the same for the carers and staff at The Orchard in Ganarew. Mum lived her last months warm, clean and well cared for. She was content and happy at Ganarew in ways Judith and I had not seen in Mum in years. I will always be grateful to the Ganarew staff for their extraordinary kindness and professionalism towards Mum.

Thank you.