

In Memory of Donna Dillow

February 12, 1940 - April 8, 2010

Obituary

Donna Jean was born at home February 12, 1940, on a farm south of Sharon Springs in Western Kansas-the first born of Glenn Darius and Hazel Marguerite (Baehler) Whitney. Her early life on a farm set the stage for her open-hearted, hard-working approach towards life.

Donna wasn't an only child for long because her brother Billy was born the following year in 1941 and her sister, Glennis, came a year later in 1942. If patience and tolerance are inherited virtues, Donna received them from her mother, Hazel, who managed a newborn, a one-year old, and a two year old along with caring for an ailing mother who was incapacitated by multiple sclerosis. Four years later, another sister, Karen , joined the family. Donna may not have been financially wealthy, but she was wealthy in love and family.

Without modern diversions, the three played with one another and with numerous cousins who lived in and around Sharon Springs. On Saturdays, everyone went to town for groceries and to catch up on the latest news. Oftentimes, the cousins would go home with other relatives, making it seem as though there were many "parents" and "siblings."

Many Sundays, Donna's family would get together with aunts and uncles, cousins and friends for large family dinners. Donna recalled all the dishes they would have to do when the families got together and reminisced about the future fantasies she and her female cousins would have such as never having to use a dish more than once or to wear a dress twice. She also recalled how mischievous her brother and her male cousins were, although Donna would admit she wasn't always an angel either. She told of one time when she and Billy climbed up on top of the chicken coop out of reach of their mom and then proceeded to gag themselves as their mom frantically rounded the coop trying to get them down.

One thing Donna truly loved was family. Some of her fondest memories were the times spent with her "Grandma" Whitney. She loved learning how to cook, bake and sew from her grandmother. She also liked singing hymns with her while her grandma played the pump organ. Donna remembered losing her big toenail to a baby calf named Rusty at her grandmother's. They had gone out to feed him, and the calf stepped on her toe. Donna would probably have let him step on all her toes just to spend time with grandma.

Around the age of 10 or 11, Donna's family was forced out of farming when softball-sized hail destroyed the house in which they lived as well as the crops. They moved to Sharon Springs where her dad went to work full time for the Wallace County Road Department. He also had worked for the county prior to the hail storm, but now it was the sole income.

At around the age of 12, Donna began babysitting for families in Sharon Springs. She used her money to pay for things the family couldn't afford such as going to the movies or treats such as cokes and candy, not just for herself, but for her brother and sisters as well.

In school, she enjoyed playing team volleyball and was in the choir. Sports were activities in which she and her siblings participated for fun. They would get the neighborhood together for sandlot softball or pickup basketball. Donna enjoyed these activities and was a fierce competitor.

In 1951, Donna's family grew with the addition of her little sister, Twila. From the beginning, Donna took charge of the new baby. Twila remembers being told that Donna was who she first called "Mama." They were always together as Donna's best friend also had a new baby brother, and they had fun getting them to "kiss."

In 1954, Donna took a nanny job for the summer in Denver, Colorado. Soon after in 1955, Donna's family also left small-town life and moved to Westwood in Denver. "Big town" life was very different, but Donna adjusted easily, making friends and adapting to the change of pace.

Donna attended Kepner Junior High and then went on to West High School. She developed friendships that lasted for many years. In 1956, the family moved to Lakewood, Colorado, where the last of her siblings, Sherry, was born. Donna then attended Alameda High School from which she graduated in 1958.

She was a hard worker. If it could be done, it would be done. Throughout high school, she waitressed at a neighborhood store and diner referred to as "Doc's," which was across the street from where she and her family lived. She would go to work before school, then rush home, drop off her apron, and run to school, which was about three blocks away. She would return to the diner after school, then go home, do homework and get ready to do it again. Even with all her work, she still managed to attract friends who would come over to the house for an impromptu sock hop or just hand out.

After graduation, she married her high school sweetheart, Johnny Spahn. Then a year later, she became a mother herself. On January 31, 1959, Donna gave birth to a baby girl, who she named Joyce Diane. (Joyce later gave Donna her first two grandchildren, Clint and Chasity.)

Except for a brief period in California, Donna spent the rest of her life within a mile of where her parents lived in Lakewood.

After high school, Donna worked at Montgomery Ward Department Store in shipping and receiving. She always found fun in her work. She once recalled coming across an invoice with the customer's last name spelled like the "F" word, although it wasn't pronounced the same way.

A couple of years later, she and her new family moved to California, but a happy union wasn't meant to be. By 1963, Donna and Joyce had moved back to Colorado by themselves.

Not one to rest, Donna found employment at Denver's most prestigious hotel, The Brown Palace. During her time there, she worked on the front desk and in the Ships Tavern. It was an interesting interlude which produced many stories. It was also somewhat of a culture shock for a small town Kansas girl. She once asked a waiter what the bowls of water with lemon in them were used for. She had never seen a finger bowl. Once, on her birthday, one of the waiters brought her the first martini she had ever drunk. Not liking the taste, she placed it under her desk and forgot about it until she found it a couple of days later.

Donna also recalled many of the celebrity guests who stayed at the Brown Palace such as Jerry Lewis, who threw his keys at her when he was checking out. She also remembered when the Beatles stayed at the hotel during their first U.S. tour. She didn't want their autograph because they smelled of "BO" and marijuana. She also noted that many celebrities were much shorter and balder than they seemed on television or the silver screen. She remarked that the late Marvin Davis, Sr., a local business tycoon who lived at the Brown Palace, always ate steak tartar for lunch.

It was around this time when Donna met her future husband, Arbie Dillow. Arbie had recently been discharged from the Air Force and was working for Frontier Airlines and moonlighting at a service station near her home. Donna often called it kismet or fate. On April 29, 1965, Donna gave birth to her second child, Troy Lynn.

Soon after Troy was born, Donna decided she needed a change and left the Brown Palace to work at Central Bank and Trust as a teller. She enjoyed her work at the bank except during the winter. She worked in a drive-up window and there was only a small space heater. They were not allowed to wear coats or gloves in the drive ups. This was the late 1960s and early 1970s when women had to wear dresses and heels to work. Needless to say, she was cold in that small booth

On April 18, 1973, Donna and Arbie welcomed another son, Brian Keith. He was named after "The Brian Keith Show" in which the actor played a doctor in Hawaii. It was one of her favorite television shows.

Donna continued to work at the bank until 1975 when she left to be a stay-at-home mother and raise her children. Donna wasn't just a "Mom" to her children, she mothered everyone from the heart-siblings, friends and neighbors. She was always there with a shoulder to lean on and a hand to help. She was someone who listened without judgment and who shared unconditional love. Though her foundations were shaken when her mother died unexpectedly in 1976 at the age of 57, she held strong to her love of family.

It wasn't until 1978 when Donna found her true calling. When her son Brian entered kindergarten at Rose A. Stein Elementary School, she began volunteering in the classroom. Soon she was offered a paid position as a teacher's aide. Working with children again, Donna was finally back in the field where she excelled. She loved children. She had an incredible gift of being able to set boundaries while encouraging them to excel.

Through her open heart and caring ways, she developed special bonds with many of them. She called them "sugar" or "hon." If one of them started misbehaving, she would threaten to "throw them in the dumpster." But they all loved her, and she loved them. Many of them would run up to her at the playground to get a hug. She had to wear a washable coat because of all the dirty little hands and faces they pressed into her. Even 20 years later, she would be out shopping and someone would come up and ask her if she was Mrs. Dillow from Stein. Though many years had passed, Donna would still know the name of the former student and often ask about specific family members. Oftentimes, Donna had seen two generations of the family pass through Stein.

According to the teachers with whom she worked, Donna made their job so much easier by completing every task assigned efficiently. Because of her help, they said they were actually able to do planning and have time to consult with their peers. Donna moved from the classroom to the front office at Stein, where she worked for numerous teachers, helping prepare classroom handouts and projects. She then was placed in charge of attendance and reception duties. Donna not only knew the names of most every student, but knew the parents and family as well.

Donna retired from Stein in 2001 at the same time as her best friend, Gloria Garcia. She kept in touch with many of the friends and coworkers from Jefferson County Schools and looked forward to the monthly retired alumni luncheons.

In 2004, her son Brian gave her another grandchild, Madison, Donna spent nearly all her time helping to care for her. They had a special bond, and spent days and nights playing and learning together.

Diagnosed in September 2009 with stage 3B lung cancer, Donna spent the remainder of her life bravely confronting the treatment of the disease. It appeared that she had completed the worst of the treatments and was looking forward to continuing improvement. Without complaining and keeping a positive outlook through all the pain, Donna did her best to heal. A rare side-effect of the disease unexpectedly took her life on April 8, 2010.

Donna is survived by her husband of 38 years, Arbie, her three children, Joyce, Troy and Brian, three grandchildren, Clint Dillow, Chasity Shaw and Madison Dillow, and two great grandchildren, Malichi Dillow and Johnathan Busha. She is also survived by her brother, four sisters, and many nieces, nephews, grandnieces, grandnephews, other family and friends. She was preceded in death by her mother in 1976 and her father in 1995.

Her smile, her laughter, her genuine joy when sharing time with family and friends will be greatly missed. She will live on in her family because she is part of who they are, how they see the world, and how they live. She was loved.