

Lessons Mama Taught Me

By Shelby L. Cearley

Recently, I watched an episode of "Everybody Loves Raymond" in which Raymond wrote a practice eulogy for his father. The usual hijinks ensued, and in the end, Ray's mother asked where her eulogy was. I thought, "Who writes a eulogy unless you need to deliver one?" The answer, as I recently discovered, is no, sometimes you write a eulogy even when there is no reason to give it because the person it honors deserves to be memorialized.



Figure 1-Patricia Kay Elder, 1949

Before I begin, allow me to give you a brief biography of Mama. Patricia Kay Elder was born on 18 June 1949 at St Joseph's Hospital in Fort Worth, Texas, to gas station owner Burl Elder and homemaker Delma Myrtle Thomas Elder. Known to the family as either "Patti" or "Patti Kay", she was the third and final daughter, Burl and Delma already having Mildred Jean (then aged 16) and Barbara Gail (then aged 7). I will discuss more about Mama's personal life throughout the rest of this essay.

There are many ways in which I could write this tribute to Mama. I have chosen to share with you the some of the most important lessons Mama taught me.

Lesson #1 - A Good Education Is the Foundation for a Good Life

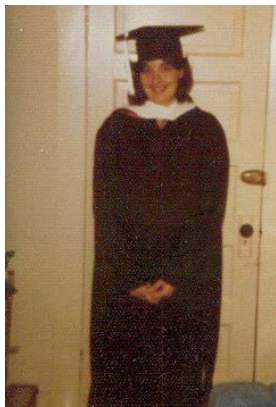


Figure 2-Mama in her Master's regalia, 1975

From the time I was a child, Mama stressed the importance of a good education and why it was important to do well in school, especially when you don't like the subject. She attended Morningside and E.M. Daggett Elementary Schools, E.M. Daggett Middle School, and Polytechnic High School in Fort Worth, Texas. She then enrolled at the University of Texas at Arlington in 1967, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts in Foreign Languages (Spanish and English) in December 1970. Mama took a break to teach in public schools, but she quickly realized that she needed additional education in order to better support her growing family. She earned a Master of Arts in Linguistics in 1975, also at UTA. She completed a Doctorate of Education degree in English at Texas A&M University-Commerce in May 1980.



Figure 3-Daddy's LCU graduation, 1993

Because education was so important to her, Mama wanted others to have the benefit of an education. After she married Ron Cearley in 1989, she encouraged Daddy to finish his college education. He enrolled in South Plains College, where he earned an Associate of Arts degree in 1991, and he later received a Bachelor of Science degree in Interdisciplinary Studies from Lubbock Christian University in 1993. Daddy then sat for the Examination for Certification of Educators in Texas later that summer, passing the certification exam and earning his lifetime teacher certification in Literature and Language Arts, Journalism, and Speech Communication. Like Mama, Daddy worked in public schools for the next few years.

Lessons Mama Taught Me

Mama even found ways to help encourage me when I began to struggle in school. I am the first to admit that I am an Arts and Humanities person, not a Math person. When I began attending Levelland Junior High School, my grades allowed me to enter a fast-track program for math, which meant that I could start Algebra I a year early. I tried my best, but I struggled to learn the various theorems. My grades were not good, and Mama wanted to find a solution. She visited with my teacher, Leo Cottenoir, and they found a tutor for me, a Mathematics major at South Plains College. It helped a little bit, although my Algebra grades didn't improve as much as Mama and Daddy would have liked. The next year, my grades in Algebra II were still not good, and I even failed the class for one six-week period. Again, Mama tried to find a way to help me, but this time the tutor was Keith Mixon, an associate professor in Mathematics at South Plains College. He helped me enough to boost my grade almost 2 full letter grades in the following six-week period. As a reward, Mama and Daddy let me get my ears pierced – *quelle* treat! I continued to struggle with Geometry and Pre-Calculus when I entered high school, but that is another story.

Being a professor at South Plains College, Mama was keen for me to be able to take courses at the college as soon as possible. At the time, dual credit courses were not available, so Mama had to petition Robert Martin, principal of Levelland High School, and the college administration to allow me to take Government at the college and receive both high school credit and college credit. Permission was granted, and I was the only high school student in Mr. Norris' two government classes. It was awesome being able to leave the high school early two days a week! My younger sister Kathryn was also allowed to do this the following year. Dual credit was not allowed by the state legislature for several more years.

I graduated from high school in 1992, and despite my poor math grades, I graduated eighteenth in my graduating class of 198. This made Mama and Daddy very happy. I also was awarded a Smallwood Scholarship from South Plains College, which paid for the Associate of Arts degree in Speech Communication I earned in 1994. Eventually, I graduated Magna Cum Laude from Texas Tech University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication Studies. I hope to follow in Mama's footsteps and eventually finish a Master of Arts degree in Communication Studies and someday earn a doctoral degree.

Lesson #2 – The Arts Feed the Soul

Mama loved the arts from a very early age, partially as a result of her mother's desire that all her children learn the piano and violin. She began piano lessons in the first grade and violin lessons a few years later. Mama would've been the first person to admit her "talent" as a violinist was not sufficient; she always felt that her older sister Mildred was far more talented, and although she kept the violin, she hardly ever played it after graduating from high school. Mama truly shined on the piano and later on the organ. She had a natural aptitude for both instruments, excelling both as a soloist and as an accompanist. She began college studying Music Performance, specifically in accompaniment, but she eventually changed majors so that she could better support her family. However, she kept an interest in music for the rest of her life.

Mama began working at churches as pianist and organist when she was seventeen. She worked at several churches across North Central and East Texas, including Handley Baptist Church in Fort Worth and First Baptist Church in Gladewater, and also in Mississippi (First Baptist Church and Calvary Baptist Church in Newton). Upon moving back to Texas, Mama served as pianist for the SONShine Senior Adult Choir, Young Musicians Choir, and the Young Adult Choir at First Baptist Church from 1983 to 1993, organist at St. Michael's Catholic Church from 1990 to 2000, and as organist at First Christian Church from 1987 to 2014. She always looked forward to playing the offertory, communion, and special music time during the

Lessons Mama Taught Me

service, spending a lot of time choosing and then practicing the solos she chose with great care to suit the liturgical calendar.

Mama took great pleasure in teaching people how to play the piano. She began teaching as a teenager, and she continued teaching until the mid-1990s. I estimate that she taught more than 300 students over the years, but I'm sure that her most challenging students were her four children. Mama decided that she would start me with a different music teacher. We were living in Newton, Mississippi, at the time, where Mama taught English at Clark College, a private two-year college. She made arrangements with the music teacher Calvin to teach me. I was nearly five years old at the time, and I didn't much care for the thought of spending thirty minutes a week on something other than Sesame Street. One of Mama's favorite stories was the time that I locked myself in her office instead of letting her take me to Calvin's office. Mama's keys were on the desk with me, and it took her over half an hour to locate the college's security guard to unlock the office. By that time, my lesson time was over. Soon, Calvin moved to a new college, and Mama took over as my piano teacher. When we moved to Levelland, she asked Shyrle Hill to be my teacher; then Mama took back over when my junior high school activities made it difficult to have scheduled lessons. Mama was very pleased that during my senior year of high school, I was the first person in Levelland Independent School District history to go to the state University Interscholastic League Solo and Ensemble competition for piano, playing Chopin's Nocturne 72 Opus 1, a solo that Mama and I worked on for more than four years.



Figure 4-Shelby and Faith Lewis, Melodic Duo

Like her mother, Mama made her children play both piano and an instrument, although she let us choose the instrument we wanted to play. Matthew chose the drums, much to her chagrin, I chose the flute, Kathryn chose the French horn, and Anthony chose the trumpet. Money was tight when we were growing up, but Mama found a way to provide Kathryn and me with private lessons to develop our talent. Kathryn earned places in All-Region band all four years of high school and All-State band for two years; she also made All-State Band for two years in college. I made All-Region Band and Texas Baptist All-State Band in high school. We both played solos for UIL Solo and Ensemble, accompanied by Mama. Although he didn't stick with the trumpet for long, Anthony has become an award-winning actor in regional theatre productions throughout the Fort Worth metropolitan area. Mama was so pleased to see Anthony perform in Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part II* on her birthday in 2011.

Mama also had a desire to share her love of the arts with the community. She was a founding member of the Fine Arts Council of Levelland in 1984, serving as the organization's president from 1987 to 1991. This organization's primary goal was to bring an awareness of the arts to the citizens of Levelland. Every summer, they hosted the Fine Arts Camp at South Plains College. Each Christmas, they sponsored a performance of selections from Handel's *Messiah*, and Mama would accompany the choir on organ. My favorite memory of the Fine Arts Council, however, was of the two lectures they sponsored shortly after the organization was founded. The first lecture was given by Emmy Award-winning actor Tony Randall, and the second was by Academy Award-winning actor Charlton Heston. Both men, whose bodies of work Mama greatly admired, were funny and entertaining. Thanks to Mama's efforts, I have personal autographs from both men! If only I could lay my hands on my elementary school autograph book...

Lesson #3 - Hard Work Is Its Own Reward



Figure 5-Burl, Patti, and Delma Elder, 1968

This is a lesson that Mama learned from her father Burl. Granddaddy started a gas station in 1931 on Main Street in Fort Worth, building it himself with his father-in-law J.P. Thomas. He eventually expanded the gas station to include an auto parts shop. During World War II, Granddaddy was not eligible to enlist due to his eyesight, but after closing the gas station in the evening, he spent nights working at General Dynamics to support the war effort. He later sold the gas station and went into construction, establishing Burl Elder Construction Company and specializing in fire reclamation construction and expanding to include a real estate sales division. He retired in 1974, but he kept his real estate license active until 1986.

Mama took Granddaddy's work ethic to heart. She began working in churches in 1966 at age seventeen, and she continued to work steadily until her retirement in 2013 at nearly 64 years of age. She spent much of her day teaching, grading, and advising students, often spending much of weekends on schoolwork. She usually graded her students' assignments three times: once for grammar, once for spelling, and once for meaning; because of this, her grading took a lot longer than other instructors, but Mama took her role as professor very seriously. While at SPC, she also served as Academic Advisor for English and Education majors for almost her whole tenure. She also served on the Faculty Senate for several terms and as Campus Liaison for the Texas Community College Teachers Association for several years. Mama particularly enjoyed her service with TCCTA, as she felt that community colleges often did not get the recognition that they deserved.

Mama also worked hard outside of her teaching career. In 1984, she published *A Guide to Writing the Research Paper*. She was asked to participate as contributing Humanities lecturer for *Texas Voices: 1836-1986* in celebration of the Texas sesquicentennial, a project sponsored by the Texas Libraries Association, East Texas State University (her alma mater), the Texas State Library, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She established *The Windmill*, an online publication for creative writing, which was published for two years. I published a series of film reviews for the publication, and some of Mama's former students also contributed to the publication. She also served on the editorial review board for Harcourt Brace Jovanovich for several years reviewing textbooks.

I sometimes feel that I learned this lesson a little too well, as until this year I often worked ten- to twelve-hour days six days a week...

Lessons Mama Taught Me

Lesson #4 - Perseverance



Figure 6-Patti's High School Graduation Photo, 1967

I mentioned earlier that Mama attended Morningside Elementary, Daggett Elementary and Daggett Middle School. The two Daggett schools were not located near where the Elder family lived, which necessitated long commutes to and from school. This was at Grandma's insistence, since her two older daughters also attended these schools. She wanted Mama to attend Pascal High School, Grandma's and Mama's two sisters' alma mater. However, after years of not being able to go to school close to home, Mama put her foot down and demanded to go to her local high school, Fort Worth Polytechnic High School. Granddaddy was all for it because Poly was his alma mater. Several "heated discussions" and crying sessions later, Mama won and was able to enroll at Poly. It was here that she met Daddy, so it was a good decision!



Figure 7-Patti the Figure Roller Skater, mid-1950s

Mama was also a competitive figure roller skater as a child. This required hours of practice each week plus several competitions throughout the year. She thoroughly enjoyed this activity, competing for several years in pairs' figure skating. She enjoyed the costumes and the routines. She also was a member of the Stripling Teen Board while in high school. Stripling's was a department store in Fort Worth, and its teen board had two girls from each of the high schools in the city. Mama always said that she didn't know how she was chosen, although looking at her photos, it's not hard to see why – she was stunning! Against her father's wishes (although Grandma secretly approved), Mama did a little bit of modeling while on the Teen Board. She apparently was offered the opportunity to participate in pageants, but she opted not to do this. I'm not sure why though...

Lesson #5 - Take Care of Your Family

Mama married her first husband in April 1968, having four children between 1971 and 1982. Throughout this marriage, her primary goal was to take care of her family, both as wife/mother but also as the primary breadwinner, even while attending school full-time. After completing her bachelor's degree, she worked briefly as a public school teacher in East Texas before deciding that this was not the best way for her to provide for the family. She chose to return to school to work on a master's degree, during which she worked as a teaching assistant. Her work was well thought of by her supervisor, who was instrumental in introducing her to Dr. Fred A. Tarpley at TAMU-Commerce. Dr. Tarpley offered Mama a graduate part-time teaching position after she was admitted to the new doctoral program. He served as her dissertation supervisor, and he also was instrumental in Mama getting her first full-time faculty position at Jarvis Christian College in Hawkins, Texas. Mama moved the family from Commerce to Hawkins, where she taught full-time while continuing to work on her dissertation research and writing. Mama worked at Jarvis from 1977 to 1979, at which time she moved the family to Newton, Mississippi, where she got a job at Clark College, a small private college affiliated to the Southern Baptist Church.

Lessons Mama Taught Me

While at Clark, Mama felt that her college salary was not sufficient to support the family, so she began teaching piano lessons in the evenings. She taught between 15-50 students at any one time, all while working full-time as a college instructor. She also worked as a church pianist and/or organist since the age of 18. Despite all this, Mama made time for her children's school and extra-curricular activities. My favorite example was her attendance of our marching band performances. She hated sports, but she and Daddy regularly bought season tickets to the Levelland Lobo high school football home games. They typically read books during the first two quarters and watched the marching band perform its half-time show. As soon as the band walked off the field, Mama and Daddy would leave the stadium. They also came to one of our out-of-town games each year, usually to our game at Lowery Field in Lubbock. I know that she was *VERY* excited when the last of us were done with marching band!



Figure 8-Mama and Daddy's wedding photo, 1989

As Mama approached her final days, I told her repeatedly that she didn't need to worry about taking care of Daddy or the family anymore. She had done her duty, and I would take care of Daddy. I hope that she heard me.



Figure 9-Top Row: Christi, Kathryn, Angela, Shelby. Middle Row: Daddy, Mama, Anthony, Libby. First Row: Ronnie, Debra. (Matthew not in photo)

Patti is survived by her husband of 26 years, Murray Ronald "Ron" Cearley of Levelland; son Matthew Dean of Lubbock; daughter Shelby Cearley of Levelland; daughter Kathryn Cearley Davidson and son-in-law Richard Brantley Davidson of Hoover, Alabama; son Anthony Cearley of Fort Worth; stepdaughter Christi Cearley Hawk and stepson-in-law Chris Hawk of Chillicothe, Ohio; stepdaughter Angela Cearley and step-granddaughter Daisy Arrowood of Chillicothe, Ohio; stepdaughter Elizabeth "Libby" Cearley McVicker, step-grandson Nicholas McVicker, and step-granddaughter Kaylee McVicker of Chillicothe, Ohio; stepdaughter Ronnie Cearley Jones, stepson-in-law Brian Jones, and step-

grandsons Talon and Jet Jones of Chillicothe, Ohio; stepdaughter Debra Cearley of Chillicothe, Ohio; sister Mildred Elder Stone of Fort Worth. She was preceded in death by her father Burl Elder, mother Delma Thomas Elder, and sister Barbara Elder Bogart. Should you wish to honor Mama's memory, we suggest donations to the [South Plains College Foundation](#) or to the [Alzheimer's Association](#).

I will do my best to abide by the lessons you taught me. I love you, Mama.