

Joan's Celebration of Life

My family and I would like to thank you all for attending Joan's celebration of Life. Some of you have come from a great distance, and the family greatly appreciates that.

We are all united today in remembering that wonderful person who was our Joan. We are not here to immerse ourselves in grief, although grief is what we are all feeling. Instead, we are here to celebrate Joan's rich and rewarding life. We are here to share our memories of her and to feel a warm glow as we remember the happiness we felt when we were with her.

We all knew a part of her...Some of us knew her for many years - others for a shorter time. But not one of us knew everything about her. I will spend a few minutes today in filling in as much as I can, so you all can get a fuller picture of our Joan.

She was Joan, Joanie, Aunt Joan, Joanie baloney, Jersey. I had many silly terms of endearment for her through the years. But to me, she was my world, she was my everything. She was Joan Eve Valladares, born on Nov 28, 1948 in Jamaica, Queens NY to Rudy and Iris Valladares. She was the youngest of 5 children – her siblings were Lewis, Steven, Barbara and Kathy. When she was around 7, the family moved to Queens Village. She went to PS134, a few blocks away. I lived around 10 blocks away from her and also went to PS134. I was a crossing guard and could very well have crossed her as she went to school. But I was 3 years older than her and living 10 blocks away in Queens was like living in another country. I never knew her at PS134.

She went off to JHS 109 in an accelerated learning program and that's where she learned and fell in love with the French language, which she enjoyed all her life. She then went to Andrew Jackson HS nearby and until her senior year, I had no idea of her existence.

But before I go there, I want to raise the first of the remarkable qualities that Joan had that is worthy of celebration. She loved her family so much. She loved her parents, cousins, aunts and uncles, which many of us do. But she had the closest and most wonderful relationship with her siblings. When she was a child, a teen, a young adult and a mature women, she had no arguments or difficult times with her siblings - nothing but the most loving relationship with them. For the 48 years I knew Joan, it was one of the most endearing traits she had. This love and closeness was reciprocated by the whole family and made for a relationship that was fulfilling to all involved.

In the early Summer of 1965, I met Joan. My future best man Tony Maneri, who died in his thirties from complications from Type 1 diabetes, was going out with

Joan's friend and they hatched an idea to go on a double date with Joan and I, who had never met one another. A blind date. I was leaving the next day to spend a summer in the Catskills playing in a band at one of the many resorts there and this was my last night in town for the summer.

I met Joan and I was blown away. Not only was she so beautiful, but she was lively, funny, self assured and intelligent. Wow! It took 6 weeks to get a substitute for me in the band, so I could get back to Queens and see her again. I was head over heels ...but... did not play it smart. I came on too fast and she backed off. She was only 16.

She went out to San Francisco to visit her sister, Kathy, who had married Al Verza, who we lost to cancer 10 years ago. Joan loved her time with her sister and husband. After around a year, she came back to Queens. This time, I was smarter. I didn't need Edward Snowden to find out where Joan was hanging out at. Consulting my network, I just happened to "run into" her at one of the lounges she frequented and played it very cool. I didn't call for awhile and then not too frequently. After a little time, I ratcheted up the effort and after a while, she was a goner. I asked her to marry me and we set the date for mid-September, 1968 – 3 months after I graduated college.

Joan's cousin, Al Landa and his fiance' Roberta were also getting married that fall and without knowing it, we picked the day they were going to use. They generously agreed to change their date and we made plans. Except a few months later, Joan and I agreed that we shouldn't wait the 3 months after I graduated and we should get married the week after I graduated on June 16th. So poor Roberta and Al changed their date for nothing, and we forever appreciated their never holding it against us.

I now would like to raise the next attribute that Joan showed that is worthy of celebration. Joan was adventurous. She loved to read about people and places as a child and collected stamps (just like me) that gave her an interest in faraway lands. This gave her a desire to one day see the countries she was only able to read about when she was young. More about that later. But in 1968, after caring for her mother who had been stricken with a stroke, Joan agreed that I should look for a job anywhere in the country and she'd thoroughly enjoy the adventure. So the two of us, never having spent any real time outside of Queens decided that I would accept a job in Houston, Texas and we would go there to start our life together. It was fantastic.

Joan loved her life in Houston. We moved into a new and modern apartment with a pool outside the door and she said she felt like a Princess. We (she) made many friends and we had a wonderful time there.

This brings me to a funny episode, when Joan was this cute little 19 year old New Yorker working for a staid architectural firm in Houston. One of her bosses

requested that she ask him every morning if she could get him a cup of coffee. Being 1968 in Texas, this was not an unusual request. After a week or so of her asking and he saying he didn't want one, she strode up to him and asked him why. To which he said, Oh, I hate coffee. I just love to hear the way you say "cawfee"

After a year my job sent me to Fort Worth and she enjoyed the adventure of that as well. We met more friends and in 1970, Lisa was born at Harris Hospital in Ft Worth, TX. Yes, folks – Lisa is a Texan. I joined EPA in Dallas just after Earth Day and we built a house in Arlington. She was such a great decorator – and practical and we spent more time having it built than we lived in it, because after asking and being assured by Joan that it sounded like fun, I took a job with EPA in Chicago in 1973.

Chicago was great – and four marvelous things happened to us there. One, Laura was born in 1975 in Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield, IL. Two, we met a branch of the Voltaggio family we never knew existed and they were our closest family for the 4 years we lived there. Three, I joined a 50's and 60's rock and roll band and started a life of a 3 piece suited environmental enforcer on weekdays and a black leather jacketed rock and roller on weekends. And Four, we met Henry Balikov and Mary McMahan, who worked with me at EPA and it started a 40 year friendship that continues to this day and has made our lives so fulfilling.

In 1977, after Henry and Mary moved to Philly the prior year, my job at EPA took us to Philadelphia as well and we re-joined them. We bought our house in Cherry Hill and then Tom was born in West Jersey Hospital in Voorhees. Joan was starting to see a trend. She said: "Wait a minute. Every time we move I have a baby. Three is enough! We just can't move anymore." And we didn't.

We have been here for 37 years and this is the home that all our children know of as "where they grew up." Our friends multiplied, and an important part of our lives was started – The birth of the "Family." To those that don't know, the family is a combination word of friends and family. It's a group of friends that don't have family nearby and spend vacations and holiday together as families do. In other words, it signifies friends so close that they are like family

We met Bill and Marie McLeod just after we moved to Cherry Hill, and together with Henry and Mary and Joan and me, this triumvirate became the Family. Marie and Bill had 3 children close to our children's ages and Mary and Henry's 3 children made our Family group. As the children grew up in this family, they interacted as close "cousins". As the children got married and had children of their own, they joined the family as well.

Joan loved the family members in the same manner as she loved her family. The family children and grandchildren were nieces and nephews and grand

nieces and grand-nephews. Together with her own siblings and nieces and nephews, she felt so blessed by all the love. In fact they are all here today.

And that brings me to another of Joan's qualities – her unstinting love and devotion to all her friends, family, family and acquaintances. She never missed a birthday (well - almost never) of any of these children – and when the children got married and had children – to the little ones.

As our children grew and matured I got to see them show the same love for their parents and to each other that Joan had with her family. We were, and I am, so proud of how they love one another. It was our children expressing the kind of love with each other that Joan had with her siblings – truly one of the greatest treasures she could leave them. What a gift to celebrate!

Another quality to celebrate. Joan was incredibly talented. She decorated cakes amazingly well and did them for friends and family and sold others as a cottage industry. Some pictures of her cakes will be in the next room. She did needlepoint, quilting and most anything else that was creative and necessitated using her hands. She was a whiz at crossword and jigsaw puzzles. She was incredibly organized and volunteered to be the secretary for the book club and gourmet dinner group – and was for 30+ years. And starting in the 1980's, she did all that organization with *the computer*, becoming a real whiz with some ancient programs such as Wordperfect for DOS and dbase III. Folks, this was the 80's. She was not a geek, just remarkable.

Our children have been a blessing for us. What caring, loving people they are. They grew up, married (remarried) and have wonderful spouses. Joan loved her sons and daughter-in-law, her 9 grandchildren and she wanted to be there to help when they were each born. They were the gleam in her eyes and she loved getting pictures and then photostreams and facetimeing with the grandkids. Zoe, Maya and Xander will have the clearest memories, but through pictures and video, all of them will see "Jersey" as she was – a loving, caring grandmother.

Another attribute I'd like to celebrate today is her sense of fulfillment for her love of travel. Boy, did she love to travel. It had started vicariously with her stamp collecting with trips around the US when the kids were young - and then in 1984 with trips to Europe with assorted friends, family and family. Joan and I planned all of these European trips ourselves – and she loved the planning almost as much as the trips. This was back in the days before the Internet and we would write letters and make phone calls overseas and go to the post office to get postal money orders for deposits. We would never take a tour and would rent cars and drive everywhere. By the time the millennium rolled around Joan had been to most every country in western Europe and some in eastern Europe.

After retirement, we moved on to tours to more exotic places, including the Serengeti, Antarctica, China and Tibet, Macchu Picchu, Petra, Egypt, Angor

Watt, Nepal and seeing Mt Everest and by 2012 Joan had been to all 50 states, 45 foreign countries, all 7 continents and set foot in both the Arctic and Antarctic Oceans. At the end, there was nothing more she “had” to see. There was nothing left on her travel bucket list. How marvelous! Let’s celebrate Joan for that.

In August 30th, 2012, the day after Jackson was born, we found out that Joan had lung cancer. We had been trekking in Nepal the year before and just returned from a trip to Russia and the Baltics. She had no symptoms until the week before. And that leads me to the last of Joan’s great attributes to celebrate – her bravery in the face of a devastating change in her life. She calmly said it was a “game changer” and we needed to adjust. And we did.

Matt McLeod, our family nephew’s first wife died of cancer and I remember his remarks in her celebration of life where he said that: “Advanced cancer is a series of small deaths on the way to the final one”. How true that is. No need for details. Many of you know it. She had wonderful care at Penn – Dr Gabriel was awesome – so caring and available at any time we needed her - but we knew by last April that there was little hope, yet Joan bravely tried everything offered – once! Treatments that had little impact on her QoL were OK to continue. If it had a significant impact, she said – no more. What I remember most vividly is her saying that her life was so fulfilled that there was nothing left she felt she needed to do, so if death came, she was OK with it. Since she knew it was incurable, she feared suffering more than death itself. At the end, that’s what she chose. Within a day after she decided not to have any more treatment, with our wonderful children and me holding her hands, she passed away. How brave! What fortitude! This is sad for us, but something worth celebrating for her.

Maria Vickers, my good friend from EPA told me of a wonderful word the Italians use when someone passes away. They use the word *scomparire* – to disappear. That word is comforting to me as I hope it is for you - for it means that Joan hasn’t gone away from us. We just can’t see her. She is here with us in our memories of her and our joy for the happiness that was her life.

I’d like to close with a seemingly odd remark made by Lou Gehrig, the famous NY Yankee baseball player who was diagnosed with ALS that ended his career and would soon end his life. His farewell speech at Yankee stadium is known by many and I’d like to apply it to how I’m feeling right now. I now see that it was not odd. Lew said people should not feel that he had a bad break, because he had the memories of the wonderful and fulfilling life he had. In the same way, I’d like to say that as I celebrate the wonderful life that Joan had and the wonderful life that I had being married to Joan for almost 46 years - and I’ll use Lew Gehrig’s words - “Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth.”

I would like my wonderful children who have been rocks for me through this difficult time to come up.

...for the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth.

You're my world
You're every breath I take
You're my world
You're every move I make

Other eyes see the
Stars up in the sky
But for me they shine
Within your eyes

As the trees reach
For the sun above
So my arms reach out
To you for love

With your hand
Resting in mine
I feel a power so divine

scomparire ([intransitive](#))

1. to [disappear](#), to [vanish](#)
2. ([euphemistic](#)) to [pass away](#), to [die](#)

E' scomparsa