Kathleen and Barbara’s Tribute to Robert - April 17, 2008

Barbara and I want to thank our dad for the wonderful life he gave us. We grew up in a world of cultivated beauty at Cranbrook with fountains of mythical beings such as Odysseus’s faithful hound, an absent Orpheus surrounded by statues of composers and artists listening to that divine music of the spheres, a weeping Zeus hidden deep in the woods. He gave us summers in Seabright where we learned to swim, play cards under the boardwalk, and read in the wide green lobby on rainy days. These were the magical places he gave us.

Dad created gifts with his hands too: black and white photographs, sketches, and much of the furniture in our apartment in the Stevens Hall dorm. My sister Barbara and I always wanted a canopy bed, so Dad pushed our twin beds together and made a half canopy with the most beautiful quilted pink headboard covered with fuzzy white poodles. We loved it. Another gift was a white and gold piano—how glorious! I think Hubie Davis, one of the Cranbrook originals, gave us an old piano. Dad painted it white and swirled gold paint with a tiny brush in the carved patterns on the piano. It was beautiful.

Teaching is a gift. . . Dad taught me how to sew. He taught me how to ski. He taught me how to ice skate and swim. He taught me how to catch and ride a wave. He taught me how to drive a car—however, I did hit the only two light poles in the parking lot while learning to parallel park—and he would always inspect the undercarriage of the car for tell-tale signs of driving over parking lot barriers and large white rocks bordering driveways. What was I thinking? What were you thinking? He’d ask. Here, Barb noted that Dad taught her how to drive backwards first. She drove in circles in reverse before she attempted drive forward. She suspects that these lessons in backward driving were in response to my bumps in the road.

Dad taught me how to be on my own. When I was in 4th grade, I asked him to help me with my math—he knew the answers—but he reminded me that I would go to college one day, and he wouldn’t be there, and I would have a long division problem several pages long. I thought about that really long long division problem and decided I better start working on my own now, so I’d be ready for that problem. Sometimes, as an adult, I’d have a problem that had nothing to do with long division, and I’d call Dad and ask him for advice. The advice he gave was always helpful. He knew so much about being a good teacher—even though he had never taught on the outskirts of spin city, Washington, D.C.. He understood the demands on students so they find ways to cheat in order to succeed—create an environment where students will succeed, and create an environment where any cheating is caught before it happens. And he understood the parents of students who feel they must cheat to succeed.
Through example, Dad showed me how to be a better mom. I hope that I’m able to show my own children the love that my father showed to me. I guess that an example of this involved my son Tony, now 17, then three. Dad stood 8 feet from the edge of the pool and called to Tony to jump and swim. I was worried, but said nothing. Tony jumped, submerged and swam to Dad’s outstretch arms. Tony has loved the water ever since. I learned from Dad that I can’t be overprotective of my children.

Barb and I want to thank Dad for his gifts of a magical place, hand-made beauties, and all that we have learned. We will miss his humor and his gruff recitation of “The Shooting of Dan McGrew”. When Barb and I visited him a week and a half ago, he entertained us with:

“A bunch of the boys were whooping it up
in the Malamute saloon;
The kid that handles the music-box
was hitting a jag-time tune;
Back of the bar, in a solo game,
sat Dangerous Dan McGrew,
And watching his luck was his light-o’-love,
the lady that's known as Lou.

When out of the night, which was fifty below,
and into the din and the glare,
There stumbled a miner fresh from the creeks,
dog-dirty, and loaded for bear.
He looked like a man with a foot in the grave
and scarcely the strength of a louse,
Yet he tilted a poke of dust on the bar,
and he called for drinks for the house.
There was none could place the stranger's face,
though we searched ourselves for a clue;
But we drank his health, and the last to drink
was Dangerous Dan McGrew.”

Thank you, Dad. We will always love you.