



# ODE TO A MOTHER'S LOVE

My mom was never idle, tending to her family and working as a school janitor. She did it all for us and made it look easy. I know it wasn't.



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THE ARTICLE

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SPECIAL TO  
MONTREAL  
GAZETTE

Ralph Mastro Monaco, on graduation day from McGill law school in June 1981, with his mother, Maria.

"I never doubted my mother's love," he writes. PHOTO BY ANGELO MASTROMONACO /mon

To love and be loved is life's greatest experience. Although intangible to the touch and incomprehensible to the mind, love is real and speaks to our common humanity.

As a son of an Italian immigrant mother, I came to learn that love is a textured language that can sooth and sustain, inspire and empower but is not always coherent. We had our share of arguments.

Sometimes words were expressed that should have remained unspoken. Love is hardly ever frictionless. But time allows forgiveness and redemption to dismantle rancour. Hearts mend.

Eventually you realize that love can be conflicted and yet be understood and cherished — if you really listen for it.

The essence of love is the unequivocal commitment to foster the happiness and well-being of the one you love. A promise expressed more faithfully in deeds than words. I never doubted my mother's love. Everything she did for me made that plain.

A mother nurtures and mentors her child for as long as God continues to endow her with a sound mind and body. Mothers teach us their everything.

Here is some of the everything I learned from my mom: To be tolerant and empathetic. To be generous and give back to society. To speak up and speak out about the wrong you may see. To help the vulnerable.

From my mother, Maria, I learned the art of negotiation, gleaned from witnessing the many bargaining battles she engaged in with farmers at the Atwater and Jean-Talon markets, retail merchants on the Main and the pedlar who came to our home in his wood-panelled station wagon. It was full of merchandise he would offer to her at presumably discounted prices.

His sales pitch was always rebuffed with what were surely among the first words my mother learned when she arrived in Canada: "Too expensive!" Her price haggling antics fell flat at Eaton's — but not from want of trying — to my utter embarrassment.

Never idle, my mother was constantly tending to our backyard giardino or cooking meals, doing the dishes or laundry, or making school lunches. She never watched television with empty hands — always sewing, knitting, doing crochet or needlepoint.

She also worked full time as a school janitor. She did it all for her family and made it look easy. I know it wasn't.

She said no to most of my Canadian-inspired demands like getting a dog, going to a Disney movie or joining the Boy Scouts. But one time she said yes to something very Canadian.

One evening an Italian-speaking encyclopedia salesman showed up at our home. My father, Giuseppe, promptly informed him he was not interested in buying whatever he was selling. My mother asked the salesman to explain what these books were about. He explained that these beautifully bound books contained articles on different branches of knowledge arranged alphabetically and that they would help her children with school projects. "We're buying these books," she said to my father. My love of reading was lifted higher.

My mom acquired a command of English that got her demands met, one of which was that I receive proper medical care to cure my chronic asthma. We spent a lot of time at the Montreal Children's Hospital. The eastbound 144 bus was part of our trek home. One day, as the bus drove along the street, which was at the time called not Docteur-Penfield but McGregor, I pointed out McGill's faculty of law and explained that students learned how to become lawyers in that building. That one day I hoped to study there. "Perché no?" she replied. Why not.

During our Sunday lunch family gatherings my mother would remind her five grandchildren, in her endearingly flawed English, "Never forget — Nonna loves you too much." Her love endures in our family.

And I miss her too much.

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