

MOTHER OF TEEN FIT LESSONS OF A LIFETIME INTO TIME SHE HAD LEFT

Anchorage Daily News (AK) - Friday, February 16, 1990

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Edition: Final

Section: Lifestyles

Page: F1

She could have been any mother, sitting there on the sofa in the family TV room.

"It's always a difficult relationship between a mother and daughter," she was saying. "I've often been the one to do the limitsetting. I find I have less energy to do that and I also subconsciously say, "Gosh, I don't want my daughter to remember me as the nag. . . .'"

The popular wisdom is that mothers and daughters grope their way through the teen years together, that if they don't exactly emerge from the tunnel hand in hand, they usually hook up somewhere down the road.

But the popular wisdom doesn't mention what happens when the mother is dying, as Shari Holmes was when we talked four weeks ago. There aren't a lot of howto books when it comes to cramming the lessons of a lifetime into the time you've got left.

Still, Shari, at 44, had always been a planner. She'd spent five years on the Anchorage Planning and Zoning Commission, the Anchorage Charter Commission, the Heritage Land Bank sat on enough boards and commissions over the years to leave one of the most distinguished legacies in city service; it was pure Shari to start planning and preparing her daughter for what was to come.

Sixteenyearold Lindsey Holmes has lived with her mother's cancer for exactly half her life. She was 8 when Shari and her husband, Roger, broke the news that Mama might die.

"It sunk in to some extent," Lindsey recalled a few days after I'd talked with her mother, "but I panicked about what was going to happen to me. Then in sixth grade, when it came back, I started getting stress stomachaches. I started realizing the implications of what was going to happen to her."

With aggressive treatment and the determined, positive response doctors now say can make a difference, Shari beat the odds, a 20 percent chance of living five years. She continued her work as a potter and occasional court master, advised her friend Arliss Sturgelewski's gubernatorial campaign, spread her impressive net of volunteerism far and wide, and played many a mean game of racquetball.

Not coincidentally, she also watched her daughter grow up: "I've seen a lot of women die within a year or two who had cancer. I've had seven and a half years, and the time that I've had with Lindsey from age 8 to 16 has been real important."

Sometimes it was special occasions, like the ski vacations in Colorado; and sometimes it was the workaday taxi service mothers can provide. Last year, when Lindsey took classes at three different schools including UAA, Shari drove her from one to another, and then on to tennis afterward.

If Lindsey jokes, as she does, that her parents' devotion to their only child has made her "a spoiled brat," there is a 3.9 grade point average and an admirable career as an amateur tennis player to counter the claim.

"She is," said her mother, "very self-sufficient, poised and mature."

Still, what mother can resist the urge to suggest, to help, to advise any teenager? In the Holmes house this winter, when the cancer had renewed its deadly march to Shari's lungs, those conversations took on a new urgency, even coddled as they were by humor.

"The other day, she started giving me a whole bunch of advice all at once," said Lindsey. "I said, 'What is this?'"

"She said, 'Well, I've got years' worth of things to tell you and only a few weeks to do it in. I've got to tell you a lot of stuff at once or I'll never get it out!'"

"So my dad says, 'Yeah I'm surprised you haven't started writing it down for her: Open this envelope when you graduate. Open this one when you get your first job. If, by 30, you haven't gotten your first job, open this one. . . .'"

"We were all joking, but there was that undercurrent. And then Dad went off to his study and I went off to my room, and I think we were all thinking why she'd have to write this down: She's not going to be here."

But like the mother of any teenager, Shari knew there are some lessons a parent can't teach. Last spring, when Lindsey took a class on death in American literature at Stellar, Shari suggested she interview family friends who had dealt with sudden death.

The result was an impressive 37-page report that has much to say about unfinished business and the hard but real blessing of laying things to rest.

"I really think there is a gift you're given when you know you have a short life span," said Shari. "You can make certain arrangements. You have the time to talk to your children and husband. You have the time to get your affairs in order so you don't leave a mess behind. You can have frank and honest discussions with the people you

care about who will let you talk about it as contrasted with what Lindsey wrote about. In all three of those instances, it was so sudden, there was no time."

A week ago last Thursday, time finally ran out for Shari Holmes . She died at home three days after Lindsey and I spoke.

"It's hard because she's in pain and we've had to deal with it over the years," Lindsey had said. "Then again, we're 'prepared' for it. If all of a sudden, I was a junior in high school and my mom went off on a plane and died in a crash (an actual case in Lindsey's report), I almost think that would be harder. If you have to lose your mother before you graduate from high school, it's better to be prepared for it."

In typical Shari fashion, she had already advised Lindsey, a high school junior, about what to include in her college applications. More touching to Lindsey was the unexpected written inventory of her mother's jewelry, complete with the history and sentimental value of each piece.

Now comes the heart of Shari's planning: father and daughter carrying on. It's a close relationship, fostered and cultivated by all three. With a teenager's unerring eye, Lindsey readily volunteers that her father's disciplinary style is more relaxed than her mother's which she laughingly called "strict or sensible, depending on whether I agreed with it."

Still, there seems precious little danger that Shari Holmes will ever lurk in her daughter's memory as "the nag."

Asked what she'd remember about her mom, Lindsey Holmes looked up at the ceiling for a long time, thinking.

"It just seems like she's done everything," she said finally. "I know a lot of mothers, like, work all the time, but it seems like the mothers who work never find time for the other things. She didn't work a 9to5 job or anything, but with all the things she's done, and working on my schooling and even though she's done all that, she's always found time for me and Dad and everyone else in the world, all her friends. I don't know how she figured it all out, but she seemed to get it all in there."

Suzan Nightingale writes about women's experiences every Friday in Lifestyles.