

Eulogy for Hon. Bessie Dreibelbis, by her niece Demetra Paras.

Bessie was the keeper of our family history. She was the person who spoke at these occasions, telling the events that shaped the lives of her loved ones. She took on this responsibility seriously.

“Go confidently in the direction of your dreams: Live the life you’ve imagined.” Thoreau.

I had this quote by my computer in the past, and it appeared again when I was going through some papers. I thought, how appropriate for Bessie’s well lived life.

Bessie, was born in a modest family home in 1927, Pinole, CA to loving parents, Helen and Peter Poulos, Greek immigrants to America. Her grandmother, Elaine, lived next door, raising Bessie’s young cousin Angelo, who was like their older brother. Bessie was the 4th of 5 beautiful sisters. Katherine, the oldest, my mother Frances, Helen, who is with us today, Bessie and baby sister Patty. The family had chickens, rabbits, other animals and even a young lamb one year. Pinole was a rural enclave at that time, with ranches and golden hills peppered with oak trees.

As a child, she remembered, looking out the window onto San Pablo Ave, seeing the occasional cattle drive into town, and a bustling thoroughfare. Realizing there were so many different people going to so many different places, her dream began. She knew she wanted an expansive, interesting and adventurous life.

Growing up, her family home was a mecca for the local Greeks, and most weekends, were spent entertaining family and friends. And you know us Greeks, everyone is an aunt, uncle or cousin. It seemed like her mother never stop cooking. One weekend, her Irish God Mother, Bessie (her namesake) and God Father, Nick Alovezos, came to the usual Greek gathering. They were driven by his chauffeur in one of his town cars, (Nick’s business). Bessie, gave little Bessie a small suitcase. Being the 4th daughter, she was usually clad in thread worn hand me downs. When she opened the suitcase, it was filled with beautiful new dresses, just for her. Her passion began for fashion and travel. She must have been around 5 years old, but she told me she knew then what she wanted. (We know) There had to be a scarf in that suitcase.

Bessie attended the local public schools, graduated from Richmond Union High School, Dickerson-Warren Secretarial School, and then the first sister her family to attend college, graduating from UC Berkeley with a BA in International Relations and Political Science, in 1948. Her adventures just beginning towards her dream.

While in college, and because of her interest in international relations, she was chosen as one of the students to attend a United Nations luncheon in San Francisco. She sat at the table next to President Truman and they had a lengthy conversation. In 1945, the United Nations agreement was signed. After graduating she considered a career in international relations, and working for the UN. Bessie stayed local, employed as a legal secretary for the law firm of Carlson, Collins, Gordon and Bold. While working at the firm, she met another legal secretary, Susan who was encouraging and supportive as Bessie pursued her aspirations. They have



enjoyed a deep lifelong friendship. Several years later, she also met a young 23 year old woman Lois, who eventually was her court reporter, and they have also shared a lifelong friendship. I know there are many of you who have similar lifelong relationships with Bessie.

With another friend, Eleanor, her first Hawaiian adventure began. They booked passage on the Matson Lines', famous Lurline. I remember the confetti and streamers cascading down on us from above and as passengers waved goodbyes at a San Francisco Pier. However, they didn't leave on the

Lurline, because of a strike. It didn't stop them from getting on a Pan Am flight and flying to the balmy beaches of Hawaii. That was her first flight of many flights to the islands, and other parts of the world. This experience was an early indication of Bessie's attitude of persistence. Once she had her mind set on something, she was unstoppable.

Bessie met a well-liked local business man, a Montana transplant to Richmond, Faye Dreibelbis. And in 1954, they married. Faye, was a cowboy at heart, a member of the local all male mounted sheriff's patrol. He owned a beautiful horse, and placed in many equestrian events. Bessie who had taken horse riding while at Berkeley was comfortable with horses. Back then the women had to be invited to ride in some parades with the patrol. Faye invited Bessie. You know Bessie, she wasn't exactly a cowgirl, but she liked to try new things, with that adventurous spirit of hers. By 1956, they had a son, Peter Charles, the joy of their lives.

Having that adventurous spirit, Bessie was captivated by new experiences all her life. Taking on a road less traveled by women of her time, with Peter in diapers, Bessie went back to night



school at Golden Gate Law School in San Francisco, she being the only woman in her law school class. By day, she continued her job at the law firm. Faye, a loving and devoted husband, also took a path less traveled by men of his time, supporting her dreams. Faye would have dinner ready for her when she came home from class. Admitted to the bar in 1962, she became a partner in the law firm where she worked. By 1969, she

became President of the Richmond Bar Association. Her dreams became her reality.

Even as her career blossomed, Bessie continued to be a loving, wife, mother, daughter, sister and friend. Family was her priority. Then tragedy hit. Faye died of a heart attack in 1969, leaving her and Peter, who was then a teenager, bereft. Even during that difficult time, she showed concern and generosity to the community and people in her life. In 1973, Bessie was

appointed to serve on the Bench of the Municipal Court by then California Governor Regan. She accepted becoming the first woman in West Contra Costa County to hold an appointment judgeship. In 1977, a newly formed court, Richmond, San Pablo/ El Cerrito consolidated, and Judge Bessie Dreibelbis was named the first presiding judge of this new court. Bessie served



over 20 years in Contra Costa County. After retirement she took jobs in different courts throughout California, serving on the bench another 20 years until was 85.

She had a deep sense of responsibility. She was following her dream, not blazing a trail, however, a trail she did blaze. She became a role model with her intelligence, generosity, and strength. She managed to thoughtfully preside over many court cases, I never heard her discuss. I assume they were tragic and deeply painful acts against humanity. I have been so impressed

that she held onto her own humanity, and belief in fairness for all people. On the lighter side of her judicial duties, Bessie took pleasure in officiating over many happy marriages. Bessie moved through life with grace.

With the British Queen Elizabeth's death and her life in the news this past month, we can see that Bessie's generation of notable Women had a certain demeanor and commitment to their positions in life. As it happened, while traveling with an attorney group to England, she had an audience with Queen and Queen mother. The Queen made a comment to Bessie about being the only women attorney among all men. I don't think she thought of herself in those terms.



In 1983, at a social event, the paper read, "goodlooking" Bessie was introduced to Prince Talal brother of the Saudi King and told, "Believe it or not this is a judge." He thought he was meeting Sandra O'Connor, Supreme Court Justice. When that was straightened out Bessie asked him about judges in his country. The Prince said, "No, there are no women judges in my country, and we're having trouble keeping the men judges." I can see Bessie smiling.

Bessie continued to travel and explore different countries with friends and her son Peter. Travel was a passion for Bessie, part of her dream. Then tragedy struck again. Bessie lost her cherished Peter to an untimely death. She persevered once again,

managing grief with her deep faith.

Bessie and Ed Margherio, met late in their lives, married now for 22 years. She enjoyed Ed's large extended family. Fortunately, Ed loved to travel, and the two of them, continued to see the world and enjoy adventures with his family and friends. These past weeks, their devotion to each other was magnified and heartfelt to experience.

When not traveling, and at her home, domestic Diva comes to mind. Bessie was not only intellectually brilliant, she created the most beautiful tables when she entertained. Her table settings were unique and enticing, and her cooking was fabulous. Her curiosity helped her develop an international palate and kitchen. Many a Sunday dinner was enjoyed by family and friends at her generous table. Always a gracious hostess, friends and new friends alike at her many parties, Soroptimist friends, birthday lunch friends, and Bunko group enjoyed Bessie's creative touch.

It has to be mentioned again, that she loved clothes, scarfs and jewelry. As I mentioned the passion started from receiving that childhood suitcase and never ended. Bessie was fashion. She continued to dress stylish and wear a scarf, even when she was ill. It was just who she was, living her dream.



I asked my Aunt Bessie how she wanted her legacy to be remembered, she didn't hesitate, she said, "service to my community, and of course love and devotion to my family." Love and care of family was just a given to her.



I have to mention a few of her community positions which include:
Member of the National Women Judges Association, the California Judges Association, the National Association of

Women Lawyers, the American Bar Association, and the Contra Costa County Bar Association. She was also a member of the Board of Directors of the California Judges Foundation, the

California State Bar's Family Law and Legislative Committee and the City of Richmond Charter Revision Committee.

Bessie was affiliated with the Brookside Hospital Service League, Quota Club International (President 1968-1969), Children's Hospital of the East Bay, Queen's Bench, Board of American Red Cross, Board of Directors Richmond Art Center, Board of Trustees Brookside Hospital Foundation, Board of Directors Boys Club of Richmond, Rotary International, The Oakland Scottish Rite Club, President of Soroptimist International of Richmond.

Her Honor Bessie received the Woman of the Year Award from Soroptimist International in 1982. Women Helping Women Award, the Woman of Achievement Award, the Campfire Girl's Award, and the Golden Gate University Law School Alumna of the Year Award. Membership in the Delta Kappa Gamma Honorary Educator's Society. Until 2 years ago, she was active with the Soroptimist International of Richmond.

Bessie's generosity extended to all aspects of her life, not just with the amount of time and dedication she gave contributing to the good of her community. She was thoughtful, kind and gave time and care to her family, friends, neighbors and those she met, even for the first time. She was a beautiful, gracious, and deeply spiritual woman of her Faith. I know that many of you have stories, history and memories with Bessie over these 95 years of her life. She told me, she thought of herself, as just "Down to Earth." And we know down to earth, with her flare of her scarf.



Her intellect, sense of adventure, compassion and thoughtfulness of all people are her legacy to me, and Bessie's legacy will live on. New dreams will continue for the many individuals whose lives she enriched with her gracious presence. Among Bessie's many books, she had a book of poetry by Emily Dickens, who wrote, "I dwell in Possibility". Bessie did go confidently in the direction of her dreams and lived her life in Possibility.

Note: After the funeral several lawyers and judges came to tell me how intelligent and tough she would be in court. One DA said that she didn't witness this first hand, however, the lore of that court had two stories besides that she was tough to appear before. One woman was appearing before her and the woman kept saying that her girls were hurting and that the sisters were in pain. Bessie, asked the woman who she was talking about and the woman responded, "my feet". Bessie then excused herself for a moment, went to her chambers and returned with lotion that she gave the woman. The lore is that she put the lotion on the woman's feet, however, I do not think my aunt would do that in court. The second story is of a woman who was on the stand and asked to tell of her assault. This woman said she could not tell what happened to her with all these people watching her. Bessie then leaned over to her and said, "you can whisper it in my ear". No nonsense judge with compassion was the verdict.