

# Life stories

A celebration of lives well lived and people well loved  
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## Trees will grow in name of kind, patriotic Berthe Agg

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**G**narly old apple trees line the driveway of the Agg home in Richmond Hill, a silent reminder of Berthe's simple pleasures in life: fresh baked pie and sliced apples on toast.

Berthe Agg didn't seek out the grander luxuries, her husband Joe recalls. Old movies and game shows, fishing, family, friends and a little bit of wine every day were what made Berthe happy.

She was a good housekeeper and an even better chef — her pastry was second to none — but her simple kindness, above all, is what those who loved Berthe will remember.

Berthe passed away under the driveway apple trees from an aneurysm Nov. 7 at the age of 76.

Like her parents before her, she lived a life of quiet generosity, Joe recalls.

Berthe grew up in a remote community about 200 miles north of Quebec City, in a town known to be the coldest in the country, where life was not always easy.

Her father owned a general store and had a reputation far and wide for being a generous man.

"He basically gave away the store," Joe says. "He felt badly for people who came in hungry and gave them groceries for free."

That kindness caused him to lose the store, however, and the family — with 13 children — was left with nothing.

"They had nowhere to live and

moved around the Lac Saint Jean area. They would be in these cold, uninsulated houses heated by wood stoves. Berthe and her sisters slept like spoons, trying to stay warm."

Her nose, she used to say, stayed frozen all winter long.

Berthe's family suffered more tragedy along the way and deaths long before their time, but kindness survived.

As a young woman, Berthe and her sister were lucky to find jobs at Bell Canada. She later moved to Toronto where, in the late 1960s, she met Joe on the bus to Richmond Hill. She was a beautiful girl — had even won beauty contests — but Joe was smitten by her friendly personality.

"There was always a friendliness about her," Joe recalls. "No matter what their status in life, the lowest or highest, she was friendly towards everybody."

She loved her job at Bell, worked there for 34 years with hardly a day off, and her employees loved her, Joe says.

She also made her mark in Richmond Hill, working with Joe to organize annual trash pick-ups along the town's waterways.

She called herself "the boss" of the creek clean-up efforts, overseeing the paperwork and directing volunteers, while Joe focused on collecting the garbage and recyclables.

Berthe touched many in the community, whether it was the coffee clatch at Walmart or her



STAFF PHOTO/KIM ZARZOUR

Joe Agg looks at a photo of his wife, Berthe (and inset), who loved trees, Canada and making a difference in her community of Richmond Hill.

regular morning chats with Helen, manager of the local Burger King.

Joe has gathered a temporary tribute to Berthe in his dining room filled with memories and mementoes: an award from Bell, a communication recognition from the town and a ceramic rabbit to remind him of her favourite backyard bunny. Her old school books from childhood are filled with hand-stitchery and neatly handwritten notes on how to be a good Catholic; an old ancestry book outlines how the family came to France in the 1600s.

A gold maple leaf and poppy sit atop the container holding her ashes.

"She was so proud of her national heritage. She did not like to be called French-Canadian. She considered herself a Canadian who spoke French."

Joe wants folks to know how important it is to get things in order, because that's what they did — had their wills written up — and it made things much easier. But, he adds, "the one thing that I regret is not properly saying my farewell to her".

It happened so suddenly. As the ambulance attendants arrived, she joked with them about her appearance — just like her to be thinking of how she impacted others, right to



the very end.

She left behind her sons Andre and Bernie, brother Gilles and sisters Miche and Irene.

They planned for about 100 people at the funeral, but many more came to show their respects.

"They just couldn't get in the doors. They were lined up."

It brings to Joe's mind the message from Steve Jobs who, on his deathbed, reportedly felt unsatisfied with his life.

"I guess no matter how much money you have, it's what you leave behind — your family, your good works — that count. She left a string of good relations, a lot of people who looked up to her and cared for her."

In lieu of flowers, Joe asked for donations to Toronto Wildlife and the Canadian Mental Health Association. And to those who came to say goodbye, he gave out tree seedlings, 200 in all.

"I wanted them to have something growing, a way for them to say, 'that's Berthe's tree.'"

Life stories



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