

Helen Magdalene (Miller) Fraga

Submitted by a collaboration of surviving children Elaina, Carole, Linda, Joseph II, Kimberly, and James

Early years -

Mom was born in 1924 in North Branch, Michigan. She had a younger brother, Karl, who died of an ear infection when he was very young. Soon thereafter, Mom lost her father to tuberculosis. She recalls her Dad having her sit at the end of his bed and talking with her about being a good girl and listening to her mother when he passed away. Mom was only 4 years old at the time but this is a cherished memory for Mom.

After Mom's father passed away, her mother took up residence in the home of Mr. Walter Brace as a housekeeper and homemaker. Mom had four step-siblings from this arrangement, Walter II, Russell, Dorothy, and Sharon. Mom grew close to Dorothy and they have been friends to this day. The Brace household was not a nice place since Mr. Brace was a mean soul. He was mean to his farm animals and to his kids, he was unkempt and swore all the time. It was a very cold and dysfunctional household. Mom came to despise this man so much that she asked her mother if she could live with her grandparents. Her mother said "yes".

Mom spent the rest of her childhood being raised by her grandparents, Mina and Peter Hoffman. Mina was a special lady. She was part Cherokee Indian and was born with a veil over her face. A veil is a thin membrane that covers a child's face when they are born. Veiled children often have a deeper sense of spirituality and intuition. Mr. and Mrs. Hoffman raised Mom in the Catholic faith and showed Mom how to live a good Christian life. Mina helped Mom with her catechism lessons and taught Mom the deeper meaning of the blessed sacraments. Mom was able to take tap dance lessons and reading the Sunday comics with her Grandfather was one of her favorite things to do. Mom's grandparents taught her about manners, respect, grace, and etiquette.



Mom loved school and loved learning. She was in the student council, was a majorette in the school band and was the Vice President of the class of 1942. Mom wrote her first poem for her senior class graduation and thus began Mom's legacy. While in high school, Mom became friends with Carmen and Mercedes Fraga. Mom

and Aunt Mercy were best of friends and Aunt Mercy even helped deliver Mom's first child, Joe An. Mom always liked visiting her Fraga sister friends. She said the whole Fraga family were very nice to her and showed so much love and affection for one another, it was like a breath of fresh air to see love in a family. Mom admired the Fraga family for the love, respect, work ethic, faith, and character they embraced as individuals and as a family.

Adult years – facts, stories/anecdotes for the time they were on their own. Including military, early jobs, marriage, later jobs/careers.



Courtship:

Mom would visit her friends at the Fraga homestead to play. Mom thought that John Fraga was the most handsome of the Fraga men and that Dad (Joe) was too much of a show-off and into his cars too much.

Dad would often take his sisters to dances on the weekends and Mom would come along. One day Dad asked Mom out on a date and Mom agreed. On their first date, Dad brought Mom a box of candy. Mom and Dad would go dancing or to the movies as they courted. Dad took Mom to her senior prom and brought her a beautiful corsage to match her dress. They laughed a lot on their dates and were polite and nice to each other, they treated each other as a lady and a gentleman.

When Mom and Dad were first dating, Mom's mother did not care for Dad. She told Mom to never trust a man with a mustache.



A New Life Together:

With World War II heating up and Dad being drafted, Mom and Dad decided to get married.

They were married in May 1942 at St. Peter & Paul Catholic church in North Branch, Michigan. There was a small reception and dinner at the Fraga farm afterwards.

Mom was pregnant with their first child, Joe An when Dad was shipped off to the Pacific theater. Mom lived with the Fraga's while Dad was away. Three years had passed before Mom would see her beloved husband and Dad would see his baby girl for the first time.

Mom was a brave soul. When Dad was released from the Army, she planned to meet him in Chicago. Mom's mother did not want her to go. Mom was a small town girl without much exposure to the big city. Mom had to take a bus to catch a train to Chicago. Then, she had to take a taxi to the staging area where she was supposed to meet Dad. All of this was a whole new world to Mom. She was scared but was determined to see the love of her life. When Mom arrived at her destination, she was told to go to a certain building and Dad would be there. She went but there was no one in the building. After a long period, Dad finally came walking into the building. Mom and Dad hugged and kissed and Mom felt their true love between them flowed and blossomed at that moment. Life will be fine now, we are together for the rest of our lives.

With Dad back, the two were ready to start their life together. Since they had little money, Mom and Dad lived with Dad's sister Francis and her husband, Nate, until they could save enough money and buy a home of their own.

Soon after they settled with their first home, their family began to grow. Over the next fifteen years, Mom and Dad brought seven more children into this world who they loved each and every one in their own special way.

Family:

Almost every person on earth believe their mother is the most precious and beloved person on earth. We are no different with our mother. Other than the Blessed Mother of God, our Mom was the best mom in the world because she was everything

to each one of us in our own special way. Mom had super-human qualities. She was a teacher, a prankster, a nurse, a cook, a magician, a story teller, a woman of grace, a beauty to behold. She was everything.

Mom was constantly on the go, from the crack of dawn to the end of the day, each and every day. Mom would be packing lunch for her husband while she was stirring her little angels to get up and get ready for school. Mom would feed the children and pack their lunches and shuffle them off to the bus stop. Mom would then tidy the house, make the beds, do the laundry, and begin to prepare dinner. There was always a full dinner with everyone at the table. No matter how bare the refrigerator or cupboards were, Mom made sure every little mouth would be fed, part of her magic.

Mom was creative. She would make sure that Santa came. Cookies would be half-eaten and the glass of milk would be drunk. The howling wind in the windows were the elves watching over us. The Easter Bunny would leave his paw print on the little one's cheeks. The tooth fairy always came in the middle of the night.

Since there was little money to spare, Mom showed us how to be creative by making things from ordinary items. Mom showed the girls how to make doll houses out of game boards and pine cones and showed her boys how to build a house of cards. She taught us to be creative and imaginative.

Mom was an advisor and a protector. We could go to Mom with any issue even when we did not want to face Dad. She always buffered the situation with Dad first. When Dad put out the daily chore list, Mom would look it over and scratch off some of the chores that were too hard or took too long. Mom always made sure her kids did their homework and she would play tutor and quiz us kids for upcoming exams.

Mom taught her children how to be ladies and gentlemen. She showed us proper etiquette and proper social skills. Men always opened the doors for women. "Ladies first" was taught to the boys. Adults were to be called "Mr." or "Mrs." or "Miss". We learned how to use the correct utensils at the dinner table.

Mom had an elegance about her. She made her home beautiful by adding little touches to simple things. She would turn a simple home decoration into a beautiful centerpiece. When Mom and Dad would go out, Mom would be dressed to the nines and be the cat's meow! Mom definitely turned some heads when she went out. While she did not have much, she knew how to put everything together.

Dad did not want Mom to work and she never did. When they were older and most of the kids were out of the house, Mom wanted some pocket money for herself. Dad agreed for Mom to become a Mary Kay Cosmetics consultant. While Mom never won a pink Cadillac, Mom enjoyed this. She enjoyed the company of other women and felt a sense of satisfaction in showing other women how beautiful they really are. To make someone feel good about themselves, gave Mom a sense of pride.

Faith:

Mom and Dad were both brought up Catholic and each had a deep understanding of their faith. They instilled their faith to us in many ways. Dad did this by his actions. Dad treated others as he would want to be treated, he got down on his knees and prayed every night and Dad's prayers in church were deep and solemn. Mom was the teacher to us. She would teach us right from wrong by telling us bible stories. Mom would refer to the different saints, Jesus, and the Blessed Mother when she taught us. She taught us about the different levels of sin, Heaven and Hell and Purgatory. We always had children's books about bible stories around the house (like the ones you see in the doctor's office or the dentist's office.)

Mom made sure we knew and understood the true meaning of the holidays. While she made the holidays special for us as children with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, she also made sure we understood what the holidays really meant. Every Christmas she would put up the nativity scene and would let the little ones kiss baby Jesus before she put him in the manger. Mom explained the star on top of the Christmas tree represented the star followed by the 3 Wise Men to find Baby Jesus. At Easter, Mom would show us the crucifix and explain the Passion of Christ. She explained the crown of thorns, the nails in the hands and feet, and the wound in Jesus's side. We would watch the Ten Commandments every year and the Greatest Story Ever Told was one of Mom's favorite movies. Mom and Dad brought religion to us in a very real way. They did not do it by bible thumping or citing scripture. They did it through their actions and through teaching. They were so good at this that they even turned one of us into a nun! (Bless your heart, Elaina)

Mom had a true test of her faith when Dad came home one day and told Mom that he volunteered her to be a religious education teacher. Mom was floored and upset. She knew nothing about teaching, so she went to her priest and explained "I can't do this, I have no experience." The priest turned to her and said "Helen! You have raised eight children and they are good children. You have been teaching your whole life, you can do this". So Mom took the classes to certify her as a catechism instructor. Mom loved teaching. Mom taught religious education for over twenty years. She taught mainly 4th and 5th graders. The more Mom learned, the more she taught her children. Mom's greatest satisfaction was to see former students years later and have these students tell Mom that she was a great teacher, her lessons stuck with them, and her classes changed their lives.

As Mom got older, she studied more about the spirituality side of our faith. She would read books on life after death, on Heaven and how it was structured, on the hierarchy of angels. She would pass this knowledge on to her children.

Tragedies:

In August 1978 we lost our beloved brother Val (named after our patriarch, Valeriano) in a car accident. Val had just graduated high school in June, had bought his first car with Dad's help and had landed his dream job as a fitness instructor at a Vic Tanny gym. We were all crushed by this tragic event, but Dad took it the hardest.

Mom was crushed and heart-broken. It is not right for a parent to have to bury one of their children. The amazing thing is that Mom held this family together. While her grief tore at her, she had to take care of her husband and her children. Mom convinced Dad that the accident was meant to be and he should not blame himself or be mad at God. Mom carried Dad through this rough time and changed him. Mom taught Dad how to more affectionate to his children, without being over-bearing. Mom consoled her children when they were down or sad or confused why this happened. Mom even consoled the other two young men who survived the accident (Bob Gibson who was paralyzed in the accident, and Kevin Hagemann). To this day Mom's heart aches over the loss of her son but it is her faith in God that kept the family together and made the family stronger.

In the early 1980's, Mom's first-born, Joe An fell ill with a ruptured appendix. The medical procedure failed to cleanse all of the infection out of Joe An's system and her kidneys failed. Through medical testing and the blessing of God, sister Kimberly was able to donate her kidney.

Joe An's body accepted this gift and she lived off this new kidney for another thirteen years until the new kidney began to wear out and started failing.

In 1996 Mom's baby, James donated his kidney to his sister. This allowed Joe An two more years of life and gave Mom more time to be with her first-born child. Joe An died in 1998. Mom was hurt, as any parent would be, but Mom was at peace because she knew God will take care of Joe An and that she would someday see her again.

Another tragic event tested Mom's faith. In 1994. Mom fell into a diabetic coma. Mom was rushed to the hospital and was in ICU for several days. While Mom was in the diabetic coma and close to death, she had a special moment. God touched Mom and showed her a glimpse of Heaven. She was able to see Val in Heaven but she could not touch him or talk to him. It was not time for her to leave this world. Mom eventually pulled out of the coma. This vision of Heaven gave Mom a sense of serenity and peace because now she knew that one day she would reunite with her loved ones and that there truly was a heaven.

Any other information you'd like to list – accomplishments, items of note, special stories....

The Cat's Meow:

Mom loved cats and we always had a cat in the house. Mom was busy packing lunches one morning, making sandwiches for Dad and the kids and feeding the starving kitty rubbing at her legs. Once everyone was shuffled off to work and school, Mom realized that she had not fed the cat, but the Little Friskies can was empty. "Oh my God, someone has a cat food sandwich!" So Mom called the schools to warn the kids not to eat their sandwiches. Mom called Dad's work to tell him but she could not reach him because he was already at the job site. Hours later, with Mom worrying all day, Dad came home from work. As he came into the kitchen, he was on all fours and meowing to Mom. It was a great laugh for the both of them, and, NO, Dad did not eat the sandwich.

The "Sheeny" Man:

Mom knew how to keep her kids in line when they were getting a little too rambunctious. Mom would tell us there was an old man who would come out at night in an old, beat-up pick-up truck, knock on the door, and ask if he could take anything they did not want. He was dark and scary and he would take children that were behaving badly. Whenever we would be acting up, Mom would get on the phone and pretend to call the "Sheeny" man to pick some kids she did not want because they were misbehaving. We would plead and beg Mom to call him back and tell him not to come, that we will be good kids. After what would seem like an eternity of pleading with Mom, crying, and tugging on her skirt, she would finally call the "Sheeny" man back and tell him not to come.

Reflections:

"Mom's faith and desire to know that life can be better than what she knew, made Helen a woman with strong desires and insight" (Linda)

"Mom's gentle and caring ways helped many of us through turbulent times in our lives. Mom's compassion was beyond words and her patience had no bounds. God bless her for handling all of us in our various stages of growing up!" (Elaina)

"Mama is a petite little lady but a giant in her faith and strength!" (Kimberly)

"I think Mama would say her greatest accomplishments would be her children..." (Carole)

"One of Mom's greatest pleasures is to hear someone tell her what wonderful children she has, how kind and nice, and loving they are to others" (James)

We celebrated Mom's 95th birthday (February 19, 2019)!