

Lives Lived

The Globe and Mail, April 3, 2007

Catharine Sparrow

Wife, mother, teacher, woman of gumption.

Born February 8, 1915, in Kingston.

Died February 9, 2007, in Ottawa, from chronic lung disease, aged 92.

Kay's sister-in-law Dotes would often say "Oh, Kay. You're so brave." This was a bit of a family joke, because something as routine as Kay carrying groceries or shovelling snow -- which she did well into her 80's -- was enough to prompt this comment from Dotes. But beneath the line's lighthearted surface lay a great deal of truth.

Born Catharine Elizabeth Kidd, and raised in the Presbyterian manse in Gananoque, Kay was one of the youngest women ever admitted to Queen's. Between tea dances and RMC balls, she earned an MA in English by the time she was 20. She taught at the Ottawa Ladies College until her marriage to Dr. Murray Bowie in 1941, her wedding portrait taken by Karsh no less.

When Murray returned safely from WWII, he and Kay took a second honeymoon to New York. She saw her first Broadway show, Oklahoma; they spent an extravagant evening at the Waldorf-Astoria; and had "time, at long last, to talk and talk, so much happiness between us that I kept feeling I must propitiate the gods." Exceptionally bright and literate, Kay knew what "propitiate" meant. What she didn't know was that they had barely two years left.

On that fateful November morning in 1947, Kay, newly pregnant, saw two strange men come to the door, and knew instantly that something was dreadfully wrong. In fact, a disgruntled WW I veteran had walked into Murray's office, shot him four times, and then turned the gun on himself. The man thought, mistakenly, that Murray, a medical examiner with Veterans Affairs, had cut his pension by \$20. The young doctor's murder shocked the city and prompted calls for gun control.

Throughout that desolate winter Kay worried that her shock and grief would affect her unborn child, but their son Paul was born hale and healthy (and became a doctor like his father.) Kay was closer than ever to her parents now, but within the year her father, the Rev. Charles Kidd, suffered a fatal heart attack. Plans were made for Kay's mother, Mary, to live with us in Ottawa.

Two days after she arrived, Mary took me and my 15-month-old brother for a walk. Crossing Bronson Avenue, we were run down by a school bus. Mary, as her last act, knocked me to the ground and shoved my brother's stroller to the curb. We were saved. She was killed. Early the next morning, Kay sat holding her two sons, thinking of what she now had to face alone, and feeling "I can't, I just can't" "So much of my life seemed to be slipping away from me, first as a wife, then as a daughter ..."

But face it she did. On a modest pension, voted to her by Parliament, she carried on with indomitable spirit and, to use her favourite word, gumption, devoting herself to raising her sons. And, although her life was marked by tragedy, ours was far from a gloomy household. Small in stature, but a bundle of selfless energy, Kay was quick with a quip, quick to laugh. That's what a nephew remembers most fondly about his "Aunt Betty" -- the sound of her laughter.

Kay eventually remarried in 1959 to Wib Sparrow. They built a house overlooking Patterson Creek, but he also died prematurely. Typically, Kay didn't dwell on her misfortune, but marched up the street to Glebe Collegiate to register as a supply teacher. Described by a colleague as a teacher "par excellence", she soon moved to Algonquin College, where she happily taught Canadian Studies until well past retirement age, making a host of new friends.

After teaching, Kay volunteered at the Civic Hospital, and took great joy in her family, cheering them on, and trumpeting their achievements to one and all. Not one to take growing old lightly, she finally moved into a retirement home, but that term never crossed her lips. It was the one next door, not hers, that was the "seniors' residence". Sharp-witted to the end, at her sister's recent funeral, she recited Yeats' Lake Isle of Innisfree from memory, flawlessly.

After Kay's death, a friend wrote, "I feel bereft. We've lost a grand person." We have. And a brave one.

Douglas Bowie

(With help from Kay's diary notes. Doug is Kay's eldest son.)