

in memoriam

JOANN LEWIS

1943-2004



by Hillary Hauser

I have this cherished picture of my old friend, JoAnn Lewis, standing on a ladder over my kitchen sink with yellow rubber gloves on, patching holes in the ceiling. My former husband was on a 10-day surf trip in Mexico with a couple of his surf buddies, and I was remodeling the house while he was gone, without him knowing.

An hour after he left for LAX, JoAnn was at my house with a carpenter friend of hers, and minutes later, all the cupboards and countertops were on the floor, in pieces. I saw divorce on the horizon and went into a panic. JoAnn came daily, to patch holes, paint, wallpaper, sand and varnish, and we nearly died laughing many times a day, because we knew we were being naughty like Lucy and Ethel.

When my husband came home he was properly horrified and made me cut up my credit cards. A few years later we cut up our marriage certificate, which wasn't so funny. JoAnn was there for that, too—we'd sit at the end of her big kitchen table and she would listen to me weep with regret, and then we would scratch our

heads and try to figure out things like finances, which I was also not good at. It turns out that JoAnn did this for many, many people.

Since JoAnn passed away October 3, 2004, many of us have felt not quite sure how we'll manage without her sitting there at the end of the kitchen table, helping us figure out what to do.

In the weeks and days preceding her death, JoAnn opened her door to her friends to visit, but instead of sitting at the kitchen table, we sat at her bedside. For many, it is a supreme gift to receive the benefit of wisdom from someone who has a foot in both worlds—earth and the great beyond. That's how it felt to me as JoAnn recounted her life as well as the course of the disease that would ultimately claim her, some ten days before she passed away.

JoAnn was in awful shape. She could not breathe without a ventilator, nor get out of bed, but mentally JoAnn was in wonderful shape and for hours we reminisced; she laughed like crazy at some of the old memories. How when a huge white shark was pulled up on the Navy Pier by a local fisherman, she had run into the

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scene, grabbed the skull of a barfed-up sea lion, thrown it in the back of her Jaguar, and driven off while people looked on, stunned. All the pranks she played on people, the hilarity of Julia Child dropping food on the floor; her mother, Lulu, lighting firecrackers and nearly burning the house down.

In May 1999, JoAnn had come back from Paris "out of breath," and by June she had been diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and emphysema. The disease progressed until doctors told her she would not live unless she received a lung transplant. It was a long two-year wait, filled with inhalators and numerous doctor visits. On December 28, 2001, she received a call from USC that a donor lung was available, from a man who had died of an aneurysm. JoAnn was at USC within two hours, and the lung transplant was performed. "I knew it would give me quality, not quantity," JoAnn recalled. "Some people say, 'I'm so sorry your transplant failed.' It didn't fail! It was a huge success—I should have been dead five years ago!"

JoAnn explained that those on the receiving end are not allowed to know who their donors are for a year, and so she waited. Then she wrote the donor's family at Thanksgiving, with the letter going through approval and processing at the USC Medical Center.

The donor's entire family—the wife, two children, and the mother of the man who died—came from Riverside to Santa Barbara, to visit her. "They were lovely," JoAnn said. "They stayed three-and-a-half hours, a beautiful experience; we formed an emotional bond. They were grateful I was keeping part of him alive. Imagine how I felt about them!"

The deceased man's family had made the decision to donate "everything he had," JoAnn said. "The family has gotten all kinds of thank you letters and cards. 'Thank you for the liver,' 'Thank you for the pancreas,' 'Thank you for the kidney'—a lot of tissue was taken for heart surgery and burn victims, and someone got the other lung. Can you imagine such tremendous giving? How fortunate I am!"

After moving to Santa Barbara from Rolling Hills in 1982, JoAnn signed up for a busy life. She had hosted the rowing and canoeing events at the 1984 Summer Olympics—this was about when I met her—and after that, she became involved in all sorts of organizations and causes, including Lotusland, Montecito Beautification, Westmont's Reynolds Gallery, Casa de Herrera, and her beloved Garden Club.

"Now I'm literally stuck!" JoAnn said from her bed. "And when you're stuck, you learn what it truly means to stop and smell the roses. I look out my windows at the beautiful garden. I hear the music of the birds. All this rushing around, we say to each other, 'I'll get right back to you.' We're all so busy, we think the faster we talk, the more we get done—ha, ha! We're all good at it, aren't we? I think my busy schedule was to avoid pain—and now that I'm in pain, I'm not doing it anymore!"

JoAnn's friends were blessed with many such reflections, and some were truly altered by her insights. "A number of my friends have dropped things they thought were so important," JoAnn said, "like starting Adult Ed courses they always wanted to take. You know what? We don't have to wait to get this. Starting right now, a person can test where information is coming from. Do you really need this thing from the store? Do you really need to do such and such? Probably not! We are freer than we think."

JoAnn's memorial service was held five days after she died, on October 8, 2004, which would have been her 61st birthday. Her sons Scott and Brett Habermann were fully aware that JoAnn loved to celebrate her birthday, and this was to be a celebration with no moroseness allowed. At the service, Westmont College's art director, Tony Askew, a longtime friend of JoAnn's, delivered some wacky stories—how she threw herself a birthday party at a pricey Montecito club and directed the bill to be sent to her former husband as a "surprise." How she showed up at a morning meeting at Westmont in her bathrobe, slippers, and hair curlers and announced, "I told you I'm not a morning person!"

"I've had a great life," JoAnn once said to me. "The best part was the laughter—I really loved the laughing." ■