

A dying mom's notion helps grieving children like her own

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By Cara Solomon

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To tell the truth, he can't even remember the time, or where they were, or how she said it.

All he remembers is that she said it on one of the good days — one of those free, fine days they had together, after the latest round of illness and before the next one.

"We were talking about the advantages that our boys had that others didn't have," said Ron Schaps, whose wife Nancy would die of cancer a few months later at age 46, leaving two sons. "And this idea came out."

At the time, Schaps said, he did not want to hear it. He was in a "rah, rah, we're going to beat this" kind of mood. But Nancy saw something different for herself. And what she wanted to happen was this: After she died, instead of sending flowers, friends and family would use their money to help children, like her own, cope with the loss of a parent.

Since her death in 1996, the Nancy Ellis Schaps Memorial

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Scholarship Fund has sent 28 students to ballet lessons and theater camps, hip-hop sessions and horse-riding camps, helping them through some of their hardest times. The fund, which is administered by the Mercer Island PTSA, started out with about \$2,100 in donations and about \$3,500 from Ron Schaps.

Through the years, the fund has relied on contributions from Schaps, a lawyer, along with donations from friends. This year's recipients will get word from the PTSA within the next few weeks.

"More and more down the line, I'm proud of it," said Kevin Schaps, 22, who used everything from snowboarding to glassblowing to help him through his mother's death. "I'm happy that other people in my situation can be helped."

Ron Schaps has virtually no contact with the recipients of the scholarships. There is no need. The fund was designed to send a simple message from one family to another: We understand.

Looking back on it, theater camp gave Maya Selzer just the kind of release she needed. She found some talents — in both dance and singing — and used them one summer to work through her mother's sudden death.

"I took a lot of solace in it," said Selzer, now 18 and a student at Bellevue Community College. "It taught me how to let go of fear."

Any child in the district can be nominated for a Schaps scholarship. Maya's father does not know who submitted his family's name. At the time, he was stuck in grief and struggling to raise two daughters.

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Then came this gift, unsolicited and unexpected, from a family across town.

"What a relief it was," said Jeff Selzer, who received a \$500 scholarship for Maya. "I was wondering how we were going to afford to do this stuff."

'Brilliant companion'

Every year, when the PTSA asks for nominations, residents across Mercer Island take time to remember the woman behind the fund. She was something of an Audrey Hepburn figure, her friends recalled — tall and elegant, poised and quiet, among so many madly dashing mothers.

Starting out as a law librarian, she later earned a law degree and passed the state bar. But she chose ultimately to focus on motherhood — raising two children and three stepchildren, knitting her own clothes, pushing past a fear of public speaking to become president of the PTSA council.

She ran the PTSA like a business, wearing suits to meetings and moving through agendas with a quiet kind of diplomacy. She wrote with passion and precision, friends said. One of her essays — remembered as "This is Not Your Mother's PTA" — was published in the community newspaper, *The Mercer Island Reporter*.

"In some ways, she was different from the rest of us," said Linda Kozarek, her neighbor and good friend. "She was not a 'mom in tennis shoes' kind of woman."

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Raised in Stanwood as the youngest of two daughters, Nancy Schaps was working as a messenger at a Seattle law firm when she first met the man she would marry. Ron was pacing in the library stacks, as he likes to do when he is reading. Nancy was leaning down to fit a book back on the bottom shelf.

"My first conversation with her was to apologize for knocking her over," said Schaps, who was more than 14 years her senior.

Avid readers and theater-goers, they shared a love of the law. At her funeral, Schaps would refer to his wife as his "brilliant companion," calling her the "finest editor" and "most demanding critic" in his life.

The first recipient

Gentle as she was, Nancy Schaps could be a hard woman to get to know. Kozarek slipped into a years-long friendship with her based on things in common. As mothers, they were passing through similar milestones: Kozarek had two daughters, nearly the same age as Schaps' two sons. The women had both earned law degrees, though neither practiced. Each year, they would take the classes required to keep their law licenses.

And every Friday evening around 5 p.m., they would sit around a bottle of wine and talk current events, school business and teenager stories.

They kept that talking tradition through years of illness. Kozarek would make daily visits to her neighbor, bringing jokes and tales

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about the teenagers — stories that had Nancy begging her to stop. At that point, the laughter hurt.

With her husband, Nancy would sometimes talk about the way her life felt lucky. The children would find support when she was gone — the tutors, the activities, the help they needed to get through. On a lawyer's salary, the boys could have these things.

But others could not. The Schaps watched from a distance as another family struggled, devastated by the father's death. The youngest girl wanted ballet lessons, but her mother did not have the money.

When Nancy was gone, the gift was given.

The girl was sent to ballet school — the first recipient of the Nancy Ellis Schaps Memorial Scholarship.

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