

THE TWISTED WORLD OF A STRIP CONTORTIONIST

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THIS WEEK IN YOUR CITY

WHY MACAU MATTERS

The story of the Chinese island that's changing the way Las Vegas thinks

By David G. Schwartz



FREE

The Art of Knowing Joyce

Two generations, after-school lessons and a life-changing teacher

By LINDY SCHUMACHER

► **MANY PEOPLE—OUTSIDERS AND LOCALS** alike—make fun of Las Vegas for being slow, obscure and devoid of culture. If you agree, you never met Joyce Straus. We recently lost a huge piece of our city and our lives when she died at age 77. The people who loved Joyce knew it was coming. So we prayed and hoped, but we knew cancer can get the best of the best among us. This time it did.

The Las Vegas of my childhood—the 1970s and early '80s—was small and intimate. We knew each other; we knew our town. But our parents knew we lacked something. A lovely woman, Mrs. Dombrowski, took things into her own hands and asked a neighbor to give her three daughters art classes. This began what amounted to a small movement.

Proudly, I was one of Joyce Straus' first students; thousands would follow. Little did our parents know, art was such a small piece of what Joyce gave us: It was *life* she was serving up. Struggles, pressures, intimacies and our futures were top of her list, and our art was an excuse for us to talk and listen.

To know Joyce was to love her. She never seemed to care about the physical and materialistic; she was simply beautiful to us. Simple clothes, black stretch pants and maybe a little makeup. It's somehow difficult to describe her physically; my memories of her are all feelings, ideas, lessons, places, projects, words—beautiful words.

I wish I could remember how my parents found our neighborhood by Alta and Campbell Drive, but it was a terrific place and still is. It was homey, and we knew our neighbors. Around this time of the year, the trees would start to get leaves, and the street began to tunnel and the branches would literally connect one side of the street to the other. Yes, here in Las Vegas!

I would come home from my day at Our Lady of Las Vegas



"This is where I was created": Schumacher and her daughters in Joyce Straus' front yard.

Catholic School and not even bother to change out of my thick polyester uniform. Time was wasting, I would jump on my bike and head to Rosemary Lane. This is where I belonged. The door was never locked at Joyce's house; there always seemed to be bread baking. This was where I had my first bagel.

I remember what that house felt like. Different from my own. The love was tangible. Not that my parents didn't love me; they did. But a hug always greeted me at this beautiful door. It was genuine and somehow unlike a regular hug. Joyce *gave* the hug to you—and she told you that she missed and loved you. Joyce was a miracle for my friends and me. Her house was full of creations: paint, batik, medal, wood—all of it unique and personal.

We would walk down the hall past the bedroom that belonged to my friend Karen, Joyce's daughter. We would enter our

workspace. It smelled like paint, wax, oil and dyes. At times you could not see your hands in front of your face. The wax was melting in the pans, waiting for us to create our batiks. The room was like a burning candle. But in the summer, it was too hot outside to open the doors and windows. It didn't really bother us; nothing distracted us from the meaning of this room.

Frankly, my art was horrific. Nothing was good enough for me, but it was a true work of art to Joyce. She would say, "Let it go, just stop thinking and let your hand go." I remember her taking my hand with a brush and making strokes on the fabric. That was art to me, when she took the brush and my hand in hers.

Class started with art and happy, girly conversation. What happened in school, MTV, videos, music—you get the idea. It was our own exclusive sorority house. My

class included Karen Straus, Lisa Dombrowski, Tiffany Tiberti, Meghan MacKay and Erin Bilbray. When we see each other now, we are kindred spirits. I ran into Erin at The Smith Center at the busy valet line a couple of weeks ago. We may not speak often, but there is a respect we have for each other. Words are not needed, just a look, and I knew she was missing Joyce as much as me. We were a motley little crew; I don't know if any of us ever became much of an artist—but it's a terrific group of adults. Joyce would leave us alone for a while, then she would check on us and start talking about a topic of the day: peer pressure, sex, fears, gossip, death. I even remember a night when she broached the topic of masturbation. Boy, you could hear a pin drop that night.

Weather permitting, we would leave our art room and sit outside on her beautiful

grass under her trees to talk. Still to this day, I love her front yard. This was where I was created. The reason I became who I am.

Time would pass, but our connection would not. Fast forward to marriage and parenthood. The minute I had my first daughter, Sam, I knew that I would need Joyce. As Sam grew, she would know she needed Joyce. Two more daughters came along. Every Wednesday I would drive from Henderson to my old neighborhood so that they could be with Joyce. I would sit in my car and read while they were with her, painting, drawing, learning. I honored that space; I rarely entered, but sat with my windows open hoping to hear the lessons. Joyce and the girls would eventually come out to the front yard under the trees, where they would hold hands and repeat her mantra. This was new, but the meaning was mine. These were the lessons of 1980 put into words. Words that I say every night with my girls:

I am perfect just as I am.

I am grateful for my life.

I know my inner strength.

I will be kind and helpful.

Who I am is not who you see, who I am is deep inside of me.

I am perfectly imperfect just as I am.

She taught us to celebrate the exceptional, to approach others first and to be our best.

... We were on our way to Disneyland; it was going to be a terrific weekend with family and friends. My daughter Charley sounded upset because we were missing art class.

I said, "Charley: Joyce or Disneyland? You can't have both."

"I choose Joyce," she said.

Little did we know this would be one of her last classes. I choose Joyce, too. This town will never be the same without her in it. ☺

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