



# All the Way Home, Jane

by Guy Arseneau



In April of 2016, the world at large continued its daily march to madness, mayhem and nonsense. Donald Trump, fighting an uphill battle with an increasingly hostile media, kept up his steady lurch to the White House and transgendered people demanded equal treatment (equal to whom?) under the law. Also at this time, unnoticed by those outside of her immediate family, 89-year old Jane Sullivan died at a palliative care center in Austin, Texas. As she took her last breath, a life ended but a legacy was born.

The widow of Emmett Sullivan, a furniture store executive and mother of Kate and Sarah Sullivan, she raised the profession of teaching from a mere job almost to the level of a religious vocation. Over the span of 40-plus-years in education, this high school English teacher animated the writing of William Shakespeare, brought new life to Victorian author Thomas Hardy and openly encouraged one of her students (me) to introduce the literary works of Ayn Rand to his classmates.

Lean and gifted with a smile akin to a sunrise over a mountain range, her attractive and intelligent face, highlighted by tufts of frosted hair, gave her a theatrical persona. Her commitment to teaching, which to Jane was synonymous with a genuine desire to share in abundance, allowed her to see each person she encountered as a human being gifted with inherent dignity, abilities, dreams and desires. The concept of categorizing boys and girls with condescending euphemisms such as “industrial arts major” or “fifth period business student” was abhorrent to her. Like other faculty members, she knew that terms such as “industrial arts” represented a poorly concealed code for students considered “dumb.” These individuals, tracked to go from Illinois’s Bradley-Bourbonnais Community high school (often times after a no frills detour to Vietnam) to a blue-collar job in Bradley, Illinois, had a dead end future laid out for them. For so

many who were caught in this *de facto* web of academic slavery, their bleak futures usually meant two wives, two kids, two cars, two dogs—and a life time of too much to drink. For Jane Sullivan, this type of arbitrary categorization was just too unacceptable.

Unlike many of her fellow teachers, who favored policy over people, Jane desperately wanted to understand the nuances and issues facing those with whom she shared her wisdom. As many teachers can attest, there is a certain strata of teenagers, usually boys, who are often morose, aloof and vaguely alienated from society in general and the social paradigms of school in particular. In short, they simply do not fit into the cliché-ridden nonsense and asinine triteness of *Saved by the Bell*, so popular on television in the early nineties.

Jane was especially cognizant of these “outsider” feelings in one particular boy. She encouraged everybody to keep a daily journal of thoughts, observations and opinions. Largely, the comments contained in these writings centered on pedestrian complaints about the school’s cafeteria food; yet one boy was able to use this journal as a way of understanding himself and his innermost feelings and vulnerabilities. Good looking yet largely removed from the ordinary routine of high school life, he was an extreme snob to some, an enigma to many and an icy loner to others. Yet over the course of weeks and months, he opened up in his journal and began to write about his dead brother. Unshed tears, anger, sorrow and an unimaginable sense of loss appeared in his dog-eared spiral notebook. His grammar was often flawed and his vocabulary limited, but the intensity of his feelings were real, and, most importantly, given a voice for the first time. Jane Sullivan allowed this deeply hurt youth to understand the depth and intensity of his own sorrow. In short, she helped this grief stricken and solitary boy develop a pathway to himself.

The wisdom of Jane Sullivan, and her profound

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interest in the lives of others extended far beyond the classroom. She loved the young and respected the wisdom of the elderly. Of particular note was an older gentleman named Nel C. Nelson. At 92 he was a young man during the Prohibition era of homemade moonshine but lived to see men walk on the moon. Between these two events, he was a witness to the convulsive history of the twentieth century. Living in a rundown rooming house, his gift of new pennies to Jane's daughters brought him to her attention. Soon, she was inviting him to her home for dinner and extended an invitation to him to address those she taught. It was a novel experience for Nel and offered a unique look at history for those who understood World War II and the twentieth century at large only through history books.

Out of all the facets that defined Jane Sullivan's personality, the concept of hope was the most prominent. A realist and a romantic, she had no illusions about life and its limitations, challenges and victories. Among her favorite books was the Pulitzer

Prize winning novel, *A Death in the Family*, written by James Agee. Set in the early part of the twentieth century, it examines the impact of death on a nine-year-old boy who suffers the sudden loss of his father. Later translated into the award winning play, *All the Way Home* by television dramatist Tad Mosel, both works deftly avoid the temptation to stray into maudlin sentimentality. To those familiar with both works, as the boy's father is laid to rest, a butterfly, previously unseen and unexpected, flies out of the grave and hovers for a few moments before flying away. Highly allegorical and suggestive of a soul entering the doorway of heaven, the book and play offer a sobering yet optimistic view on the subject of death and all of its mysteries.

For Jane Sullivan, who was a beacon of hope, an advocate of potential and an unending source of inspiration, her journey into eternity is now well underway. May this pilgrimage bring you all the way home, Jane.

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Emmett and Jane Sullivan in Vermont, Circa 1972