



Marge Roche: Barriers Didn't Stop Her

Born: in Edmonton

Married : to Mike Beraha in 1987

Children: Derek, Mathew, Valerie and Dana

Step Children: Laura, Wendy, Allen

Grandchildren: 15 and 8 great grandchildren

Education: BA, BSW, Masters of Organizational Development

By Louise Charach

Right off the top, Marge is special because she is a native Edmontonian, born and raised. For the past 50 years she has lived in the same house in Sherwood Park. Lest you think she has not moved very far, her life tells a different story.

This woman has excelled in many roles and has creatively challenged and navigated traditional barriers presented by marriage, religion, workforce in the many stages of her life. Smart, committed, hard working, compassionate and creative are words I would use to describe Marge. I would add “modest” too because it took a bit of research to get all the facts – that she attended university as a single parent, brought ingenuity to programming for high needs groups, won several awards for her dedicated work in Boy Scouts, travelled and worked internationally, co-hosted a radio show and handled many challenges with courage.

Our early family experiences shape us in ways we cannot always see or understand and Marge acknowledges the important role of family in her early life. Family has been important over the years and she and her grandparents were especially close. She has one brother and two sisters. A brother born between Marge and her brother Cecil died at birth in 1934. She had a strong relationship with her older brother Cecil, who became the 30th Mayor of Edmonton (Cecil Purvis) in 1977. Marge attended school at Norwood School and Riverdale School. Her grades were excellent and she loved to read. As she became older and had more responsibilities, reading was still an important pastime – as it is today.

Marge was pregnant with her eldest son at age 17 years and left her family home for married life. She had four children: Derek is currently 58, Matthew 56, Valerie, 54 and Dana 46. Matthew, a PHD in neuropharmacology, currently lives in Australia, where he has been for the past 15 years. Marge was very concerned seven years ago when Matt needed a kidney transplant. They looked to his siblings for a match but Marge wanted to be donor as she did not want two children in surgery. It turned out that daughter Dana was the only match and Marge was not. All ended well.

Marge was a single parent for almost twenty years and juggled her family, volunteer work and a professional career. Marge has left a unique gift for her children and grandchildren, a beautifully written

history of her life from birth to present. Although scattered somewhat by the miles (Dana lives in Manitoba), Marge keeps in touch with her family, a top priority for her, and visits regularly.

Three main religious experiences shaped her life: the United Church, in which she was raised; the Mormon Church to which she and her family converted in 1963; and the Unitarian Church which she joined in 1985 and where her heart remains to this day.

The Mormon Church did not have a much exalted sense of women at that time and all decisions were the purview of the husbands; women needed permission to act. Someone wanting to communicate with Marge required her husband's presence. Marge has kept letters of reprimand she received from the LDS for those occasions she was not obedient.

Everyone in the LDS church is expected to be responsible for a key area. Marge took on the role of Cub Scout leader and was active in Scouting for the next two decades of her life. Scouting was an adventure that Marge relished. Once again she found herself in a non-traditional role of leading in a male-dominated area and faced challenges along the way. She worked for a time in her father's business of automobile upholstery and was responsible for doing estimates on work to be completed. On one occasion, a customer would not accept the estimate because she was only a woman. Early on in the scouting field she heard "no woman can teach me." None of the comments or doubts lasted long; Marge simply moved ahead and excelled at all the jobs she was given.

Scouting meant training, meetings, camping, travel, ceremonies and program development. She did her last training in 1993. Female leadership was unusual and when Marge attended her first Jamboree in Inuvik, her role was a surprise to the other leaders, especially those from the U.S. In 1977, the World Jamboree was held in Prince Edward Island and hosted close to 15,000 boys and leaders, more than the population of Charlottetown. Marge was responsible for the health and welfare of 5,000 boys.

All of Marge's children were active in Scouts and benefitted from the focus on the development of personal potential.

Throughout the Scouting years, Marge rose steadily through the ranks in acknowledgement of her competence and creativity at everything she tackled. She moved from Assistant Commissioner to Deputy Commissioner to Commissioner -- the first female Commissioner in all of Canada. This was in 1978.

Marge won several awards for her contributions to Scouting, including the Medal of Merit and the bar to the Medal. She is currently an Honourary Member.

Marge remembers the boys, the lessons, her colleagues, the fun and the adventures. She also can be proud of the firsts she accomplished as a woman.

Marge's career focused on many aspects of social work. Throughout her career she worked with single parents, long term patients at Alberta Hospital, children and families with children's treatment services, and families and troubled individuals with Family and Community Services. Marge has many stories of clients and colleagues who made her career so rewarding. She had a talent for being an empathetic listener and never hesitated to share personal experiences if she felt it would help in healing wounds or

lifting burdens of others. For eight months in 1985-6, she was featured on a radio show and targeted her presentations to singles on the topic of personal development. Wherever she went in her career, there was progress. She was frequently acknowledged for her compassionate work, including the receipt of the Pride of Strathcona award in 1997 from Mayor Hartwell.

Marge recalls setting up informal coffee sessions with complex cases at the Royal Alex. These weekly gatherings focused on entertainment and recreation for these long term patients who sat idle during the day. All that changed with singing, plays, games and laughs introduced by Marge. She recalls the moment when a woman who had not spoken a word began to sing, then spoke to Marge and eventually to the nurses who were caring for her. The medical staff was amazed.

Marge met her husband Mike at the Unitarian church in 1985 through the Singles Club. The Singles Club was small but active with dances every Saturday, theatre, barbeques, and ski parties. Marge was very active in organizing the group. Marge and Mike were married in 1987. All of their children were adults, married and on the paths of their own lives, so Mike and Marge were able to enjoy the bounty life offers.

Marge and Mike led a very active life and both enjoyed the outdoors -- Mike learned to skate and they enjoyed alpine skilling at Fernie, Sunshine, Banff and Jasper. They began square dancing in earnest and were part of the "Country Cousins" group until two years ago. Every year they travelled, many times with family or to visit family. Marge had a life-long dream to travel and finally it was being fulfilled. Mike retired in 1992 and they joined the Canadian Executive Services Organization. This led to international work in Guyana and Peru, organizing the establishment of women's shelters for abused women and training volunteers to continue the work.

The Unitarian church has been a cornerstone in Marge's life for the past three decades. She is a familiar face in the church whenever volunteers are working their magic. There are only two committees on which Marge has not yet been a member: Social Justice and Ministerial Relations. (Attention, nominating committee). Marge served as President when the UCE moved into its new facility. It was a trying time of financial stress, negotiations, liaison with community and major project management. It is a tribute to Marge and the team of the day that we are in our new home.

Marge is an optimist when it comes to the future of the Church. She finds its core strength in the strong people and its sense of community. She advises newcomers to get involved as a way to meet more people and develop a sense of being part of community. There is a lot of fun waiting for church members and many ways to become involved. She predicts that we will never be a huge congregation but that we will become stronger advocates and spokespeople for many.

It was an honour to get to know Marge and to write this brief profile of her life. I was struck with the challenges and courage she displayed throughout her life. As I read the history she compiled, I noted there was no self aggrandisement of any form. She states facts, regrets, lessons, joys and burdens and leaves them "out there" without excuses or embellishments. As an outside viewer when I read the biography, from her family to her work to her church, it struck me that love courses through everything.

Marge sees the future as one that will mean some slowing down as she cares for husband Mike whose health is failing. Her life is far from over and will still revolve around family, friends, the church and travel.

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