

AUNT MARTHA

For decades now, I have considered my Aunt Martha a role model.

As a single mother, raising a son in the expensive city of Los Angeles on a school teacher's salary, and then living alone for many decades after Michael had left, she succeeded in putting together a life full of friends, travel, entertainment, culture, and adventure by sheer wit and energy.

For example, Martha lived for many years in a modest home in North Hollywood. And although that home became worth a small fortune, in the overheated Los Angeles real estate market, I don't think that Martha herself had a large disposable income, but she managed to attend every event at the Hollywood Bowl. She saw all the stars, all the concerts, all the biggest names in the business. How? She volunteered as an usherette! No need to pay hundreds of dollars for a ticket to see Frank Sinatra if you're ingenious and energetic enough, which Aunt Martha was.

She also travelled extensively. I remember that her original email address was "funtravel22@yahoo.com". (If you're a little older, you probably remember back when you had to make up something outlandish for your email address because someone else had already taken your real name.) Anyway, she went all over with her friend, Maria Marconi. Ms. Marconi, who was a native of Italy, wanted someone to accompany her on her many trips, so she subsidized Martha's travels. I'm sure Martha was a wonderful travelling companion, too, since she was cheerful and adventurous.

For example, I remember a work trip I made to Los Angeles about 20 years ago during which I planned to visit Aunt Martha. I called her when I got into town and offered to take her out for dinner. I suggested some chain (like Applebee's or something) or a local Afghan restaurant I'd happened to read about in the in-flight magazine. And she immediately chose the Afghan restaurant because she said she'd never tried Afghan food. That was Aunt Martha, to me. Always up for something.

On that same trip, I was supposed to teach a class on the studio lot for Warner Brothers, and I was so excited! I envisioned myself leaving a message on my phone "I can't return your call until later this evening, because I'll be at the 'studio' all day." The arrangements got changed at the last minute, and Warner Brothers rented a room at a hotel for the class, instead, and I was telling Martha how disappointed I was not to be going to the actual studio lot and eating in the cafeteria with (hopefully) somebody famous.

Well, she certainly made up for that disappointment. She arranged for her friend Maria Marconi to make homemade Italian risotto for my lunch break, and then to play a video of the newest Jack Nicholson movie, "All About Schmidt", which hadn't even been released to theaters yet. But because Ms. Marconi was the authorized Italian representative to the international Hollywood press corps, she got advanced copies of new films for review. While we watched the movie, Ms. Marconi commented on her interactions with Jack Nicholson, whom she had apparently met on several occasions, and also on various other well-known stars, old and new. She'd been around Hollywood a long time, and seemed to know an awful lot of people. I felt really privileged to listen to her stories (much better than the movie) and undoubtedly had a lunch break much better than I would have had on the Warner Brothers lot.

Just one more Aunt Martha story -- this one from my mother.

I remember Mother telling me about th time she asked her sister Martha what she had done with her summer, while she was not teaching, and Martha replied, with a twinkle, "I was a 'quick-change' artist in Las Vegas".

Mother said that her mind immediately went to something possibly scandalous, and her face must have shown it, because Martha didn't keep her wondering for long before she explained that she wore a money-changer's belt -- the kind with the 4 cylinders in front -- and walked around the casino floor at one of the big hotels making change for the slot machine players.

The point is, Aunt Martha was always doing something unexpected. I remember just a few years ago receiving a video from her showing her with her personal trainer, working out in the gym. And at the time, she was -- I believe -- in her 90s. What an exceptional woman.

Many of you may, like me, also have been on her email mailing list. She'd send out jokes and beautiful pictures, maybe an inspirational quote. She also sent out the occasional political story, and while our politics didn't agree, that was OK. I still got to hear from my Aunt Martha, and I usually sent her back something -- if only an emoji! (Of course it might have been a little frowny face.)

I will certainly miss Aunt Martha's emails, even the political ones, and I feel confident that wherever she is right now, she is wearing that big smile of hers, and enjoying every minute.