

## Bernice Skach

Family lore has it that when Bernice Skach retired from her last full-time job, her employer hired three people to replace her. That's fitting, given the fierce work ethic instilled in Bernice and her siblings by their German-born parents.

Like all her siblings, Bernice worked in their father's paint store as early as age 12, waiting on customers and carrying cans of paint. When not working in the store, she served as a kind of unpaid caretaker to her younger sisters. "Arbeit was the main thing," Bernice remembers with a laugh, referring to the German word for work. "You worked your [posterior] off."

Born November 7, 1930 on Chicago's South Side, Bernice Fuchs was one of four children whose first names matched in order the first four letters of the alphabet. First came older brother Arthur, followed by Bernice and finally sisters Charlotte and Dorothy. The building in which she was raised had two apartments, one for her family and the other rented to another family, above the paint store her father owned and operated.

When her father wasn't selling paint he could be found working as a painter and decorator in his customers' homes. These were skills mastered in his native Germany

From early childhood, Bernice immersed herself in music, singing in the German-American Children's Choir starting at the age of five. She also became an avid reader from an early age, despite her mother's frequent admonitions to "get your head out of those books." Charlotte recalls Bernice rising in the middle of the night to read in the dark with a flashlight, or crawling under the dining room table to read.

"She loved reading," she says with a laugh. She attended Lindblom High School, now Lindblom Math and Science Academy, on the city's South Side, tackling loads of homework as well as work around the house and the store. "I was responsible for my younger sisters," she says. "I had to set the example. My parents didn't want me to take college courses. They wanted me to work and be supportive to the family."

But she went to college anyway. After high school graduation in 1948, she enrolled at a South Side junior college, where she learned typing, stenography and shorthand. She also sang and played piano and oboe.

By 1950, she had landed a job in Chicago's bustling downtown Loop district at Bauer & Black, a medical supply company. There she rose through the ranks to become secretary to the company vice president. From Bauer & Black, she moved to famed Chicago advertising agency Leo Burnett, where she also worked as secretary to a company vice president.

In the late 1950s, she took a dance class at Arthur Murray Dance Studio. There she met fellow dancer Eugene Peter Skach, who would become her husband in 1959. Since Bernice hailed from the South Side and her husband from the North Side, they liked to joke that they did what any compromising Chicago couple facing those circumstances would do -- They moved west, to suburban Oak Park, before pulling up stakes again and heading to northwest suburban Palatine. Bernice and Gene raised three sons.

Alan was born in 1959, David in 1961 and Peter in 1972. While Gene worked as a tool-and-die maker, Bernice stayed home with the kids. She liked to sing German lullabies to her sons, and later boasted about how they excelled in everything they did. Quiet and studious as a child, Bernice grew far more outgoing as an older adult, eventually appearing on stage as an extra in productions at Lyric Opera, the city's venerable opera hall.

Gene died of cancer in 1999, and Bernice eventually retired. After a hip replacement, she moved to Lutheran Home, where she resides to this day. Her legacy to her family is her sense of humor, her spot-on impersonations of her mother's German-accented English and above all her singing and piano playing. "Bernice and I used to sing duets together," Charlotte says.

"We had that familial harmony, and we really enjoyed that. Bernice would play the piano, I would sing, or we'd both sing together." Bernice still likes to sing and joined a choir at Lutheran home.