

## Joanne Romza



If you start speaking to Joanne Romza in Flemish, she'll light up and respond enthusiastically in the native language of her parents Alice and Henry Stynen who emigrated from Belgium to Chicago in 1930. Joanne was born a few months after her parents and her two older siblings arrived in the United States.

Though always proud of her heritage, Joanne clearly benefitted from her parents' desire to seek out the American dream. Her own smarts and commitment to hard work from an early age gave her the chance for a better life for her and her family.

In Chicago, a city brimming with tight-knit ethnic communities, the Stynens were glad to find a Belgian-American Club, and Joanne recalls many fond afternoons playing games with other children at the club and enjoying Belgian delicacies while the adults socialized.

Joanne, who turned 88 on June 11, 2018, grew up in the city's Austin neighborhood. Her sister Mary is 10 years older and lives in Phoenix, Arizona. Her late brother Frank was 15 years older. She recalls a "difficult" childhood that included visits to neighborhood bars with her mother who was trying to keep tabs on her father, who was a janitor by day and often absent at night.

Joanne found a haven in school where she describes herself as an excellent student. "I was good with numbers," she says. She graduated at 16 and found a job immediately afterward at the same insurance company in downtown Chicago that employed her sister.

"Mary lied and told them I was 18," she recalls. The work was fun and life-changing. It's the place she met her husband-to-be: Daniel Francis Romza, who worked in accounting. Four years after they started dating, the couple married on May 20, 1950.

Soon after the wedding, Daniel shipped out with the Army to Korea. He spent much of his five years in the service as a cook, developing skills that he conveniently forgot once he got back home, she notes. Joanne became known for her kolacky, a Polish pastry treat that her husband's mother showed her how to make for holidays and that became her responsibility for every holiday from that time forward.

The first of the Romzas' four sons was born in 1955. The eldest son John recalls his mother going back to work as a saleswoman in the boys' clothing department at Goldblatt's, when he and his brother Robert were in school. When she worked nights and weekends, John recalls that he would help watch the younger brothers David and Andrew.

After the war, Daniel found work in a variety of careers that included vending machine service and eventually in commercial plumbing sales, while Joanne continued on at Goldblatt's.

The Romzas bought their first and only house in 1957, a two-bedroom bungalow on Oak Park Avenue in the Montclare neighborhood on the Northwest side of Chicago. They built extra bedrooms in the attic to accommodate the growing family, and they kept the basement loaded with hockey sticks and baseballs to keep the house full of boys entertained.

By all accounts, Joanne was the stricter parent, but the boy's level of mischief was never excessive, John says. She managed to keep their home life in order and work outside the house, even when the kids were young, without missing a beat. In the mid-1970s Joanne found a job closer to home at Shriners Children's Hospital where she worked for another 25 years, starting as a physical therapy aid. She enjoyed working with children, but when lifting them became too difficult, she switched to office work at the hospital and didn't retire until she was 68 in 1998.

The couple kept the house for 41 years until the last of the boys had launched. Then they downsized to a nearby new two-bedroom condo and started a new chapter, one that included extensive traveling. They went to Japan, China, Australia, and New Zealand. They took a cruise through the Panama Canal and made several trips to Hawaii.

Joanne especially loved visiting her family in Belgium. But nothing compared to their trip to Rome in the 1970s when the couple saw Pope John Paul VI wave to the crowd gathered on the plaza outside the Vatican.

When they weren't traveling, Joanne stayed busy in retirement by volunteering at Gottlieb Memorial Hospital and at St. Rosalie's Catholic Church, where she was a longtime usher and a Eucharistic minister, and willing volunteer for many other parish activities.

She also took up bowling, mostly as a way to stay connected with Daniel, who competed with area leagues. But she also enjoyed the sport and kept bowling after Daniel passed away at age 79, in 2007, after a stroke. Her four sons are married now with families of their own.

To date, the family counts nine grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Until she was in her 70's, she continued to host the whole brood at her home for the holidays. They all came to enjoy time with each other--and to partake in Joanne's incomparable kolacky.