

Geneva H. Michael



When Geneva Herndon married Delore “Mike” Michael in Sioux Falls, SD, she dictated the wedding much like she lived her life: simple, utilitarian and surrounded by those they loved.

The church was Protestant, the dress was as elegant as war rationing allowed and the only attendees were close family and friends and Mike’s Army Air Corps buddies, who also served as a guard of honor. Geneva saved the dress for years and she still has the beautiful rhinestone brooch she wore with it.

The terms of the wedding became something of renown in their family: her granddaughter printed Geneva’s letter laying out the plans on canvas and to this day it sits framed on her apartment wall. Geneva was the special only child of Stella and John Herndon, both of whom hailed from large, sprawling families.

Born in 1921, her childhood was marked by the Great Depression. Her father’s Oklahoma haberdashery business blew away with much of the Great Plains in the Dust Bowl. But, luckily, one of his siblings was a successful Dr. Pepper bottler and got John a contract to bottle Dr. Pepper for the state of Kansas.

The family moved to Topeka when Geneva was in junior high. Her father was the face of the company but her mother was the one who drove the enterprise. Unlike other women of her era, Stella always worked and she ran the books and operations for the bottling plant. Geneva inherited her independence from her strong mother. During World War II, Geneva helped the effort by getting certified as a pilot, though she never ended up taking the job delivering warplanes to military bases.

In 1940, after two years of attending Washburn University, she moved to Kansas City and a job with Kansas City Power & Light. She was an independent woman, but she assumed— as did most women of her generation— that life would include marriage, children and life centered on a home. Soon after moving to Topeka, one of Geneva’s Kappa Alpha Theta sorority sisters set her up on a blind date with Mike, a Wisconsin native. They dated through the last months of peace before the United States entered the war. He served in the Army Air Corps as a radio operator and laterally instructor.

The two married in 1942 and their honeymoon consisted of two days in Lake Okoboji, Iowa. Mike was stationed in South Dakota and Geneva rented a small apartment nearby in Sioux Falls. She got a job packing bacon at Hormel’s Morrell Meat Packing Plant. It was a real coup in that it was a hard job to get and she was well paid.

Their life for the duration of World War II was a succession of bases, including Lake Charles, LA, where Geneva got a job as the cashier at the PX. They were able to live in an apartment together by this time. The first time Mike wanted spaghetti; Geneva told him she couldn't cook it because she didn't have a long pan to boil the noodles. She went from a complete novice in the kitchen—her working mother had never taught her how to cook—to one of the finest cooks and party givers.

Geneva returned home to Topeka in 1944 in the last weeks of pregnancy with their son John. After daughter Dede was born in 1948, the growing family needed a larger home. Mike wanted to move to a farm in Lenexa, KS as he'd always dreamt of rural living and "gentleman" farming; a move Geneva nixed because there were no movie theaters in Lenexa.

Instead they bought a tract house in Prairie Village, KS, along with many other GI's, and later a lovely Tudor in the J.C. Nichols section of Kansas City, MO—just 10 miles north. Geneva became very active with social causes. She was President of the Kappa Alpha Theta Sorority Alumna Association, the Pan Hellenic Association and extremely active in the Christian Science Church serving on various committees and in leadership roles.

In 1958, Mike moved the family to the Chicago area and began his own company, M-G Publications, with his partner, Ben Ginsberg. Geneva emulated Stella in that she became the circulation manager of the magazines and often traveled with Mike on business trips. The trade journals became extremely successful and led to Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich buying the partners out around 1990.

After selling his trade journal publishing company in 1982, Mike realized his dream, purchasing 30 acres in northern Illinois he created Ladybug Organic Produce Farm in 1958. Customers were the top 25 restaurants in Chicago. Geneva would pack baskets of their produce and Mike would deliver from his green BMW, his car trunk stuffed with fruit and veggies.

Their lives began to revolve around planting seasons: Mother's Day, the family would half joke, meant asparagus. One of the perks of the business was that Geneva and Mike hosted a picnic for all the Chefs at the peak of summer produce. The Chefs loved coming to the farm, eating brats, homemade potato salad, coleslaw and homemade pickles. And the Michaels loved that they would bring the fine wine and dessert.

The family prospered in Chicago. Around the time Mike sold his magazine business, they bought a second house in Southern Wisconsin when Geneva was 52, a fact often remembered thanks to the 52 steps down from the front door to the lake. The family spent many summers there, where there was always a crowd—especially when grandkids came along.

The food was wonderful: Geneva planned what to bring up fresh from the garden and was capable of cooking for 8-20 people at any given day. Everyone pitched in and no one seemed overworked, just overjoyed. Geneva's love of decorating got a free reign. The house had been an old Stage Stop Inn so all eight bedrooms had a different color schemes: wallpaper, carpet and linens. Geneva and Dede knit afghan blankets and made quilts for the house. Everything was geared for indestructible, come-what-may living.

In retirement, Geneva applied her decorating skills to the four homes she and Mike bought and sold in Florida. Whether it was with her children, her sorority sisters, her fellow Christian Science church congregants, the life long friends she collected from Oklahoma, Kansas, Chicago and Florida, Geneva's motto was and is, "But we sure had a lot of fun."

With her tremendously positive approach to life, her infectious personality and the love and concern she showed all, she did her best to make everybody, family and friends, happy. She succeeded—and is still succeeding.