

## My Neighbor, My Friend

A petite woman with glasses and a short practical haircut, Margaret (Marge) Peterson grew up on a farm in New Berlin, WI. She was hardworking, no nonsense, and calm. She and her husband Arthur had no children of their own. They were both in their late fifties when we met.

At the tail end of the 1960s, Marge and Arthur built a ranch home behind our family's rambling 1860s farmhouse, also in New Berlin, WI. At that time, I was a tot with 7 older brothers and sisters. At the time, I was too young to have any recollection of our introduction, but the siblings & Marge strung it together for me. At the commencement of building the ranch home, there were bulldozers, mounds of dirt, and a hole where the foundation would eventually rest. Well, after the workday was done, this grand playground of dirt called to us, ready for serious cavorting. Off we went. Some played on the mounds, while others climbed into the hole and brought me down with them. Eventually a green pick-up truck with the Petersons inside slowly drove up. The siblings panicked and scrambled back to our property. I was left behind in the hole. Marge would tell how she saw me alone, crying and scared. Her heart went out to me as she carefully came to the rescue, removing me from the foundation. At that moment, who could have known the influence she would have on the building of my own foundation. Her guidance as she taught me how to bake, can, and garden, shaped who I am today.

Marge was a baker. She taught me how to bake, calmly and methodically. One Easter, she brought over a box of homemade cupcakes decorated with colorful jellybeans. These were given to our family shortly after our mother passed away from pancreatic cancer. It was a difficult time. I was ten. My dad looked tired with his eight children at the kitchen table. The happy box of cupcakes gave comfort. Marge's many kind gestures were never forgotten. Years later, when I was teaching first grade, one of my students had a terminally ill parent. I made a large Christmas tree sugar cookie for each child in the home, recalling Marge's kindness as I decorated and pack-up the treats.

Baking in celebration is always joyous. There was always Marge's annual plate of Christmas cookies, delicious. Fast forward to college, I asked Marge for the recipe of a chocolate, peanut butter bar that was one of her staples at the holidays. We made them together. Since then, I make them for special occasions, and my large extended family calls them "Marge Bars" in her honor.

Marge was a canner. She canned many of the fruits and vegetables from her amazing garden. When I was 12, Marge taught me how to make jams and jellies. Both are laborious. When the jars of preserves are set and ready to use, it is very satisfying. I have been making strawberry and raspberry jam every year since Marge's introduction. Jars are given as gifts and cherished during the winter months when the taste brings one back to warm summer days. At Christmas, the raspberry jam is the coveted prize during the White Elephant. Marge had her own raspberry bushes and strawberry plants. I now have my own raspberry bushes in the backyard. I still pick around 14 pounds of

strawberries at a local farm. I also make applesauce and dilly beans using Marge's recipe cards. She taught me that canning is connecting with the past and promoting self-sufficiency. The canning skills she taught me also allowed me to

enter my raspberry and strawberry jams at the Wisconsin State Fair in my 20s, and both won blue ribbons. Better yet, the raspberry jam received "Best of Show". I think Marge would've been proud of me.

Marge was a gardener. Her massive garden had beds of vegetables and fruit, a small orchard, and beautiful perennials. During the summer, as a little girl, I would run over to her house to see her work in her garden. I'd sit on the grass and watch her. After harvesting, she froze so much from her garden that three full size freezer chests, located in the basement, were needed to hold it all. I too became a gardener. Marge cultivated these skills in me while we cultivated a friendship that would shape who I am today.

Marge passed away shortly after my completion of college after a short battle with cancer. With the training she gave me, I moved forward learning how to bake breads, cakes, and tarts.

To this day, my hobby is baking. It relaxes me. Baking for others brings me happiness. It brings togetherness, joy, and comfort to those I care about.

Starting as a young adult, I have won numerous ribbons at the Wisconsin State Fair for baking entries. I received the coveted "Judge's Favorite" for the first time last year, an honor greater than a blue ribbon. This ribbon represents exceeding blue ribbon status by exhibiting exceptional skill and attention to detail. Those skills represent the lessons Marge taught me as a mentor and a friend.