

Debra Mann Memorial Celebration

Tuesday February 5th 2019

Welcome to this celebration of the life of Debra Mann. For any of you who do not know me, my name is Don and I was blessed to be Debra's husband for the past 23 years.

On behalf of Debra, myself, and the rest of our family, I want to thank those of you that have reached out to comfort us, and those of you who have kept us in your thoughts and prayers. And I also want to thank all of you who have come out to be with us this morning.

I would like to start with something that I have written to describe Debra as I have known her. And I have asked my friend Anne West to read it for me.

Despite all appearances Debra had a private side. By that I mean that her trials and tribulations, her challenges along the way were things that she mainly bore herself. Rarely ever would she even mention that something was hard, stressful or painful. You had to ask so that you could help her manage what she was going through. She carried herself through life with a rare blend of gentleness, and resilient strength and courage. One day in the hospital a group of doctors had just delivered an update on Debra's condition and the spokesperson started searching for words. After a few awkward moments Debra told him she wasn't sure what he was trying to say. He took a breath and then simply said, "I want you to know that the way you carry yourself through everything you're dealing with is an inspiration to all of us."

Integrity marked her approach to life. When she had a gig that involved her band mates she would spend countless hours preparing over several days. Big gigs could be weeks. Not only her career but in the home, in the community, as a parent, as a spouse, she accepted responsibility for whatever needed to be done and never took a shortcut. To her, music was a means of expressing the spiritual connection we all shared. Years ago she sang with the Boston Pops for a Christmas special. The biggest gig of her life and she told me that what she really wanted to do was to reach people on a spiritual level, in love and not just entertainment. After the performance a woman sitting next to me started to gush about the show, and my mother (as mothers do) told her that Debra was my wife. The woman grabbed my arm and said, "You tell her ... and then thought for a moment ... you tell her that she sang to our souls." What greater validation could Debra have asked for than that?

Because of the deep significance of music in her life she was eternally grateful for the family of musicians with whom she had the privilege to play. One of the first things she told me she wanted expressed today, was to the musicians. She said, "She loves you and it was a blessing to share music with you."

She was a prolific writer/composer. There was a time when she was writing a song everyday in the privacy of her studio. It was therapy, meditation, prayer, her time to investigate and express her deepest thoughts. A few weeks into her illness she sat down at the piano for comfort. She played for about fifteen or twenty minutes and when she was done I was awestruck by the beauty of what she had played. It had all the elements of a fully formed composition but was created in the moment. She just played ... and what came out was a natural expression of who she was.

When we were blessed with children Debra's performing career became greatly diminished. She decided to take on young piano students as a way of filling her time in music without the demands of gigs. She told me she was not really interested in teaching, it just seemed like something that would work. What she found out was that she loved teaching in large part because she loved her students. Offering the gift of music to young hearts and minds and watching them grow was a great joy in her life. I got to witness with her the evolution of some of these students from 3 year olds to college students with the same excitement and enthusiasm as extended family. This lead her to teach at both Brown University and Wheaton College. When I saw the exchanges she had with her college students after performances I was sure that they sensed and responded to the love and dedication Debra had for them.

As a mother she took responsibility for the way we approached parenthood always interjecting her gentle nature and loving spirit into our daily activities. When it came time for education she spent endless hours researching new and innovative methods of learning and was never afraid to think outside the mainstream. I was the beneficiary of this wealth of knowledge and as a result, became a better father by it. To quote our son Josh, "She knew our perfection and that knowing was so inherent in our relationship that you could forget it was there. She knew that we would be ok, that our natural curiosity would help us learn what we needed to learn, that we would find our right place in the world. And that trust provided in us the confidence and lack of fear that is a part of who we are."

Her commitment to growth as an individual was defined by her spiritual life. She studied and she prayed and sought every opportunity to bring her spiritual sense to everything and everyone she encountered. Kindness was a natural part of her being. I am reminded every time I drive her car with the responsibility of bearing her BNICE license plates. To those of you that know her you can be sure that she paid attention to you deeply ... that she took the time to consider what you were thinking and feeling ... that she cared about you and you were loved.

I cannot overstate how much her spiritual work shaped her experience of this life and all her relationships. She understood that she reflected Spirit, Divine Love and that this Spirit was eternal. With this understanding she also knew that we are all reflecting this same essence, which made us all kindred in sharing the same father/mother. We spoke of woman and mankind's very nature as pure consciousness. And when we share love and the experiences of life together, this resides in our consciousness forever. This shared experience bonds us eternally, meaning we can never truly be separated.

During the past two months Debra reached out to her friend Paul Nagel who is dealing with some similar challenges in his life. Paul wrote something to her that touched her deeply in a time of need. So much so that she wanted it shared today. He wrote, "I've always felt and seen your loving spirit and feel connected to you ever since we met. You live your life in the moment and you express the love and connection you have to everything and for everyone with such grace and beauty. People who you've never met but have heard your music are touched by that. It permeates your being.

You are complete. You have nothing to lose because love and beauty are what's true and real ... never lost ... your true being. I do know, love and grace is your true nature and will guide you." (end quote)

The apostle Paul wrote, "You can have faith as to move a mountain but if you have not love, you have nothing." When considering Love as a measure of her life, of our life together, your presence here today and what you hold in your hearts is truly a testimony to Debra and what she brought to the world and what continues on as we dwell in her example.

Thank you for coming to this celebration and honoring the life and memory of Debra. I know that the love we share today is holding her up as on angel's wings.

Many blessings to you all.

A few weeks ago Debra and I were sharing spiritual insights and we came upon this quote by Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science. It really resonated with us and I have asked our son Josh to share it with you.

"The wintry blasts of earth may uproot the flowers of affection, and scatter them to the winds; but this severance of fleshly ties serves to unite thought more closely to God, for Love supports the struggling heart until it ceases to sigh over the world and begins to unfold its wings for heaven."

When Debra and I discussed what might be included in a ceremony like this, she did what many modern couples do. She sent me an email, even though I was sitting in the room. In it she had a few requests. One of them was that we read a poem by Bishop Brent that she loved. I have asked our friend Gary Calvino to read it for you. By the way, Gary was the man who married us 23 years ago.

What Is Dying

*I am standing upon the seashore.
A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze
and starts for the blue ocean.
She is an object of beauty and strength,
and I stand and watch her until at length she hangs like a speck of white cloud
just where the sea and sky come down to mingle with each other.
Then someone at my side says, "There! She's gone!"
Gone where? Gone from my sight – that is all.
She is just as large in mast and spar and hull as ever she was when she left my side,
and just as able to bear her load of living freight
to the place of her destination.
Her diminished size is in me, not in her.

And just at the moment
when someone at my side says, "There! She's gone!"
there are other eyes that are watching for her coming;
and other voices ready to take up the glad shout:
"There she comes!"

And that is dying.*

Another thing that Debra requested, was that someone sing the song "Make Someone Happy" by Jule Styne.

I was wondering where in the world would we find a singer and a side musician. Well as luck would have it, we have our dear friends George Leonard to sing for us along with Jeff Cashen on guitar and John McKenna on saxophone.

George sings "Make Someone Happy" and at the end he vamps on "Be Nice... Be Nice... Be Nice. Then gets everyone to sing along until ending with one last "Be Nice."

I would now like to open the floor to anyone who is inspired, to share some thoughts or memories about Debra. If you would like to speak please stand and David will bring you a microphone so that we can all hear what you have to say.

TESTIMONIES

Many testimonies were offered for about an hour. Very heartfelt and touching. All had similar themes as to how Debra touched them in a special way, a loving way that changed their lives.

CLOSING

Thank you so much for sharing such heartfelt testimonies of Debra and honoring her with your presence here today. I know that she basking in the love that is palpable in this room.

We invite you now to enjoy this beautiful setting and share some personal time with each other over refreshments in the adjoining room.

Again, thank you so much for being with us today.

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Post-ceremony note from Don:

There were over 250 people present with standing room only. I walked to the center isle at the end to greet someone and a line formed that took nearly an hour and a half to work through. Nearly everyone wanted to express their love of Debra and what she meant to them. I knew upon reflection, that the celebration had accomplished what we had hoped. It had honored who Debra was and what she brought to the world and by Love's presence had turned grief into joy.