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Book details Aptos family's death experience

By KIRSTEN FAIRCHILD
Posted: 05/08/2011 01:30:05 AM PDT

APTOS – Joyce Vissell had a lifetime of memorable conversations with her mother, but perhaps the most noteworthy came when she was 27.

The subject: death.

More specifically, the topic was the eventual death of Joyce Vissell's beloved mother, Louise Wollenberg.

A healthy and vibrant 56 years old at the time, Wollenberg sat her startled daughter down and asked her to be excited when Wollenberg died. She went on to explain there would be no reason for grief or sadness because Wollenberg believed death would be her greatest adventure.

Thirty-three years passed before Wollenberg died at the age of 90 on Aug. 26, 2007, with her daughter at her bedside. The process of dying proved to not be just an adventure for Wollenberg, but a continuing one for Joyce Vissell's entire family as well.

Joyce Vissell, her husband Barry, her daughters Rami and Mira and her son John-Nuriel have co-authored a book that details Wollenberg's unwavering outlook on death as well as chronicles the final two weeks of her life.

Published April 21, "A Mother's Final Gift: How One Woman's Courageous Dying Transformed Her Family" also shares the Vissells' positive experience with Hospice of Santa Cruz County, their determination to honor Wollenberg's final wishes and their reactions to her death, which Joyce Vissell, 64, said came from natural causes.

"My mother did suffer," Joyce Vissell said. "She had tremendous pain, she was incontinent for the last year



of her life and she couldn't move by herself.

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"It wasn't a fairytale death by any means – it would actually be someone's worst nightmare," she continued. "There wasn't

anything romantic about the physical aspect of her death, but her attitude never changed that the process of dying and death were beautiful."

Co-founders and co-directors of Shared Heart Foundation – a nonprofit organization that offers counseling and teaching in areas of relationships, parenting and personal growth – Joyce and Barry Vissell had co-written six books dealing with relationship dynamics before "A Mother's Final Gift."

Joyce Vissell began writing the book three days after her mother's death. The rest of the family contributed their own stories and poems, and it was completed within the year. The result is a 218-page book with 13 of the short chapters devoted to each of the final days of Wollenberg's life.

Joyce Vissell said the family received positive feedback from a number of large New York-based publishing houses, but in the end found the book rejected due to its subject matter. The Vissells elected to self-publish the book through their own small publishing company, Ramira Publishing.

Priced at \$14.95, "A Mother's Final Gift" is available at Bookshop Santa Cruz, Capitola Book Cafe and online at sharedheart.org. Ten percent of the proceeds from each sale will go to Hospice of Santa Cruz County.

For John-Nuriel Vissell, who was 17 at the time, the experience of witnessing both his grandmother's upbeat attitude throughout her physical decline along with the quality of care she received from Hospice of Santa Cruz County proved to have a lasting impact.

John-Nuriel Vissell, now 21, will be graduating today from Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Ore., with a bachelor's degree in psychology and Spanish. He has spent the past two months working as a caregiver for Senior Helpers of Portland, which he described as a hospice-like organization.

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John-Nuriel Vissell said three of his clients have died during his short tenure, not all of which were as peaceful for and accepted by the deceased and their families as his grandmother's death was.

"It's very natural in our culture to fear and deny the process of dying, but death is coming," said John-Nuriel Vissell in a recent telephone interview. "My grandmother was exposed to a lot of death in her family. She lost her mother when she was 6. She was the youngest of eight and saw all of her siblings pass away.

"She was the last to go," he said. "With that much death around you, I would imagine she had a really good idea of what she wanted her death to be like and how she wanted to die."

A member of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Aptos, Wollenberg was a woman of faith who believed in God and heaven, according to Joyce Vissell.

One of Wollenberg's final wishes was that the "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's "Messiah" be played when she took her final breaths. Joyce Vissell states in the book that she made sure that the music played very loudly when the end came for her mother, who died in the apartment she lived in on the Vissells' property.

"I remember saying to my mother that I could never be excited for you to die," said Joyce Vissell of that initial conversation about death.

"She said, You will find a way to because it's important to me."

"When she died, it was a mixture of emotions for me," she continued.

"Of course, I would miss being able to talk with her and be with her, but I was also happy for her. It was the kind of happiness someone would feel when someone they love is going on a great adventure that they've been looking forward to."

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ABOUT THE BOOK

"A Mother's Final Gift: How One Woman's Courageous Dying Transformed Her Family"
WHAT: A book co-authored by Joyce Vissell, her husband Barry, her daughters Rami and Mira and her son John-Nuriel that describes the final two weeks in the life of Joyce's mother, Louise Wollenberg, whose long-held belief was that death would be a great adventure. Ten percent of the proceeds will go to Hospice of Santa Cruz County.
WHERE: Available at Capitola Book Cafe and online at sharedheart.org. Signed copies are available at Bookshop Santa Cruz.
Cost: \$14.95.
Details: phone: 800-766-0629 or 684-2299; sharedheart.org.

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