

For the love of sisters

Phil Egan - September 2023

Readers who regularly peruse my column will notice a change this month. It is the addition of the name of my sister, Barbie, to the top of the column. As you might expect, there's a story behind that.

I have often described Barbie as my very first business partner. At age 11, I took my then six-year-old sister to Sarnia's Farmers Market. We loaded a little red wagon with gladiolas and went door-to-door in the city's south end peddling them. This consisted of Barbie toddling up to the front door with an armful of glads while I stayed out of sight guarding the stock.

We cleaned up. People found it hard to say no to a cute little six-year-old selling flowers.

Barbie has always seen her forays with her big brother as an adventure – even when I took her down roads best not travelled. At age 12, seeking to expand my matchbook collection, I put her on the rail of my bike and pedalled down to the Government Docks. Shortly afterwards, we found ourselves in the Captain's cabin of a Russian freighter. Barbie was perched on the Captain's knee while I sorted through an assortment of Russian matchboxes.

My father would have thrashed me if he'd known, but Barbie thought it was great fun. It's fortunate that the Captain was not unscrupulous. He could have taken her off to Murmansk. I often tease her that she could have been married to a factory worker and living in Minsk.

For the past several years, as my eyesight has continued to deteriorate, I have leaned more heavily on my sister for help. She has taken notes while we interviewed people, transcribed those notes and helped me to craft my columns. Barbie knows me so well that she can actually finish my sentences. In the absence of my ailing computer over the past month, I have dictated two columns to her – including this one.

It is entirely fitting, therefore to recognize her contributions to my work by adding her name to this column's byline.

I grew up in a big sprawling home with terrific parents, four rambunctious brothers and five endearing sisters. As I approach my 80s and look back on my blessings, it is easy for me to see that like Laurie, my bride of 52 years, my sisters have been the great jewels of my life.

Some of them live nearby – Barb and Bev in Sarnia, and Mary-Jane in London and one, Vici, lives a half a world away in Macau. Throughout my long life I have stayed close to all of them, with one exception.

A photo that I greatly treasure is one of me sitting in our big rocking chair in my home in Oakville in September of 1984. On my lap, dressed in a bright red floral gown, is my beautiful 24-year-old sister, Frances. We had a bit to drink that night after a family wedding and, later in the evening, I carried her up the stairs to our guest room. In the morning I was off early to the airport. I never saw Frances again.

Frances's death four months later from smoke inhalation in a home unprotected by smoke detectors was a profound shock – but it has made me love and treasure my four remaining sisters all the more.

I wish that Frances had had a long life and would be here to help celebrate my 80th birthday when it comes in four years.

Life is full of many twists and turns and you can never really be sure of what might happen next. If you have a sister – or a brother, for that matter, who you haven't spoken to in ages, perhaps today might be a good day to pick up the phone and call.