Tribute to Sheila Charge

by Tom Bridle, grandson

Today we say goodbye to Sheila Charge, my Nana.

She was born in a snowstorm in 1927 in Garston, where she lived until she was aged 2. Some years ago Nana and I decided to drive on a whim up to Garston to see the house in which she was born, and we were invited in by the kindly occupants who showed us around- it clearly had quite an effect on her as her childhood was otherwise quite interrupted.

She and her parents moved to South West London when she was 2 years-old, where she lived until the war broke out and she was evacuated to Guildford. She has told us many stories of those days- from the time that she was May Queen at school twice, to her immense pride, and the experiences she had during her evacuation. She told me recently that having initially thought that standing at the front of the queue would assure her of a better placement, she instead found herself being cared for an elderly couple who had no desire to have or look after children- quite a tough situation for a teenager to find themselves in. I think this uprooting and changing gave Nana a strong yearning for stability and comfort, which she found in her adult life.

In 1944 the family relocated to Hemel Hempstead, where she would spend the rest of her live. Nana worked in Watford and joined a local ballroom dancing group. She loved dancing, singing and music and this then led her in turn to the operatic society, which would prove to be the cornerstone of her life for the next 60 years. It was through the operatic society that she met Henry, her husband and my grandad, who would request use of her typewriter and come over for chats that eventually turned to romance. They were married in 1958 and had a wonderful marriage- they were different types of people with Nana being very gregarious and extroverted and Grandad being more creative and introspective- but they complimented each other perfectly and you seldom heard a cross word exchanged between them. They helped me to see that a relationship can have happiness and longevity based on mutual trust and respect. The other thing I learned from them was the importance of placing value upon the things you own. Having both grown up in the era of rationing and food shortages, they were always very conscious of using everything, reusing everything and never allowed anything to go to waste unnecessarily. Nana was a keen costume designer and used to love using old or recycled material to make costumes and props, including using wine gums as jewels on goblets for Orpheus in the Underworld! That’s not to say, however, that they were not incredibly generous people who gave what they had to their family, often helped with local charity collections and were significant contributors to this church for several decades.

In 1959 Nana gave birth to their only daughter, Elizabeth, my Mum. Despite the demands of a baby, they managed to continue their roles in the operatic society, appearing in countless plays and musicals over the years. One song in particular from a Gilbert and Sullivan musical always reminds my Mum of Nana, and I’d like to play it now…

As Mum grew up, she eventually met her husband Mark, again through amateur dramatics, and the two of them married in 1982. Nana was working as a teacher at Dacorum College during this time and had the dubious pleasure of attempting to teach my Dad before he’d ever met my Mum, meaning that the Bridle name was always well known to her by the time my parents crossed each other’s paths. I came along in 1984 and my sister Kate followed two-and-half years later. By then Nana and Grandad were retired and now enjoying a plethora of holidays abroad, including having the opportunity to travel the world in 1987.

Growing up we spend a lot of time with our grandparents. Looking back now I’m grateful for the quiet, modest and consistent presence they provided. Anyone who knew my Nana will know that she could talk to anyone, any time, about anything, and often at considerable length. She had an astonishing memory for dates and details which allowed her to tell very vivid stories about her life experiences. Both of them were helpful, contributed to their local community but equally had a very humble sense of their own place in the World, always grateful for what they had and content within their modest rhythms and routines. We were lucky to have them as grandparents.

Nana continued to follow her routines well into her retirement, continued driving and walking and remained involved in the operatic and the church for as long as she was able. She had an astonishing number of friends from all over the country and even further afield, and managed to keep in regular touch with most of them until close to the end. She was popular because she was full of life, could keep you talking for hours and cared about other people’s lives. It only in the last few years, as she wrestled with the effects of cancer, the enormous loss of my Grandad and a stroke that she began to rest, and my Mum worked tirelessly to try and ensure she had the care she needed.

In the end she passed away peaceful at a tremendous age of 93, having led a happy, meaningful life. And while it was her time to rest, we’ll miss her terribly and thank her for everything she bought to our lives.