

By Women. For Women. About Women.

A Brainerd Dispatch Publication

# HER VOICE

RISE ABOVE  
THE CHALLENGES

Spring 2021

**PLUS!**

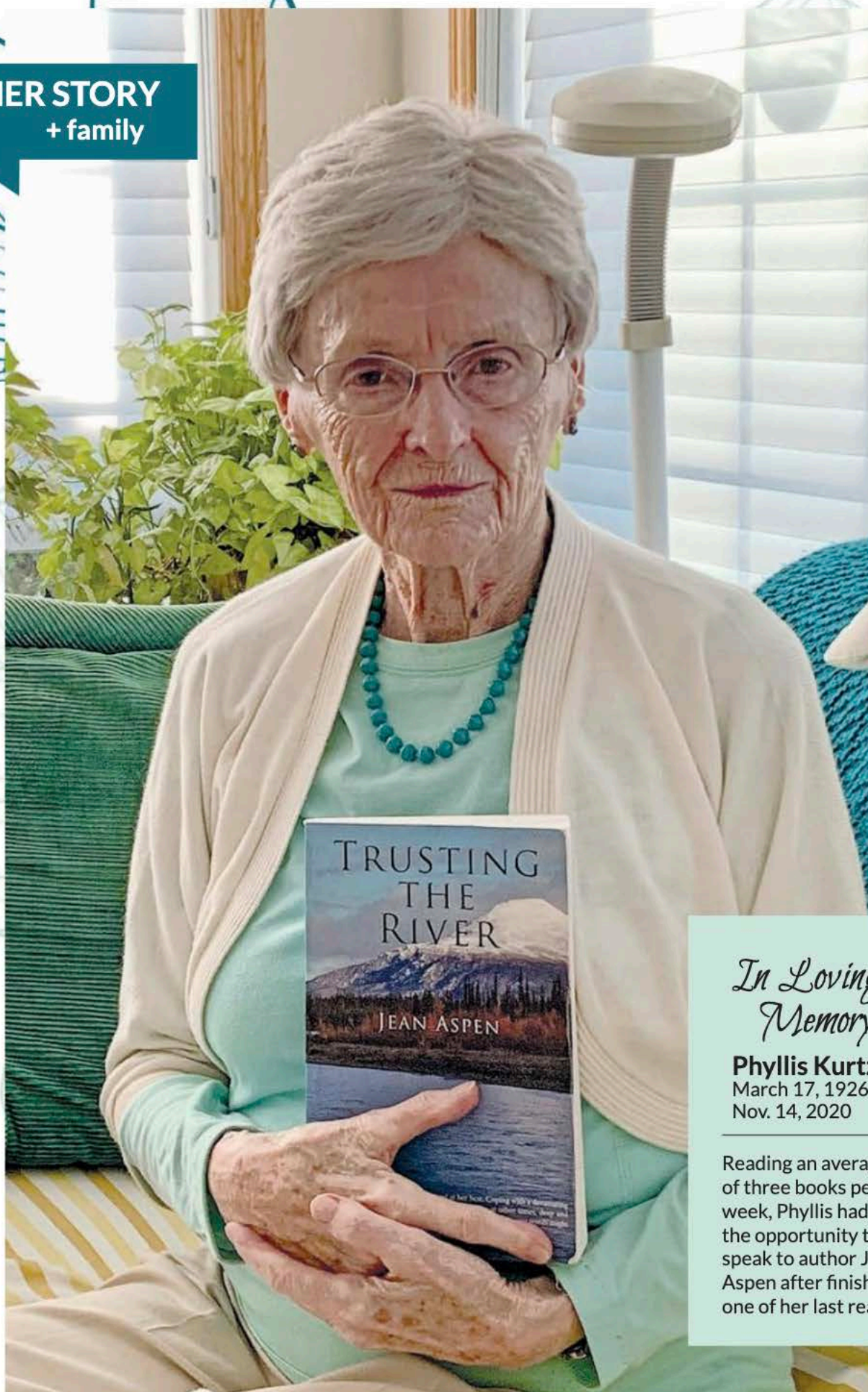
+ Embracing 2021  
Helga's Way

+ Hospice: Bon voyage  
a day at a time

+ The Abnormal  
Year



**HER STORY**  
+ family



*In Loving  
Memory:*

**Phyllis Kurtz**  
March 17, 1926 -  
Nov. 14, 2020

Reading an average of three books per week, Phyllis had the opportunity to speak to author Jean Aspen after finishing one of her last reads.



# HOSPICE

## BON VOYAGE A DAY AT A TIME

STORY AND PHOTOS  
BY JAN KURTZ

**A** rainy October Saturday morning reveals fading yellow leaves pasted to the sidewalk. The gray sky matches my mood. The cooling temperatures and encroaching seasonal darkness reflect my new reality. Mom's diminishing figure is curled inside a fluffy duvet on the couch in the back sunroom. I'm in the front room, waiting for her to ring the bell.

A month ago, the sun shone brightly on my trip to the family cabin for one last fall hoorah and seasonal closing. The day before leaving, I noticed Mom's breathing was labored. I insisted on a doctor's appointment. This 94-year-old woman who had not been on any medications for years, who walked around the block with her hiking sticks, who read several books a week, and still tried new recipes – this woman left that appointment signed into hospice.

Hospice! Now there is a word to change your day! I watched the social worker attach a DNR – Do Not Resuscitate – bracelet to her wrist and we walked out the door, down the hall and down the road of our last journey together.

"We better get busy," Mom stated when we got back to her condo. "There is so much to do."

"Make a list," she began, handing me a paper and pen. "It will give us the illusion that we are in control of something."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 30



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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29



Phyllis arranged her "treasures" for friends to choose as a "going away" gift while on hospice.

"I'll go through my closet and dresser drawers. You make the calls," she directed. "Let's see. The financial advisor, the funeral director, church eldercare, family members."

Then, pointing to the bookshelves, "My personal files are there. Start with the funeral home. I have a pre-paid funeral packet. My church isn't open with this COVID going on, so I should be getting a refund on the minister, organist, soloist . . ." she clicked off her potential savings.

"See if Hannah can stop by with my beneficiary documents. I want to review for any possible tax events. And," she added, "ask her which documents I need to save and what we can shred. Get excesses out of here."

Thus began our last stage. Within a week, the news of her situation brought in an outpouring of friendship.

"What? The phone ringing again?" she said as I was again headed to answer the front door.

"Do you think your mom might want to read 'Furious Hours?'" Pam inquired from the door stoop. "She told me she was interested in Harper Lee," she explained, handing over the book.

Back in the sunroom, Mom was on the phone. "Do you like minestrone?" Connie asked, "I've made a big pot and a loaf of French bread. I could bring it right over."

The first visits were calculated at one per morning and another in the afternoon, with an estimated stay time of 30 minutes. Two visitors max, wear masks and

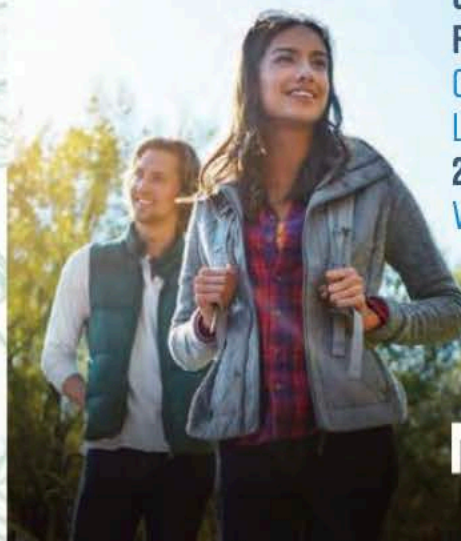
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## *Mom was hosting her own Celebration of Life. What good are stories told over an urn, when you can hear them yourself, laughing, crying and holding court right in your own condo?*

limit the amount of talking politics.

Yet, when Paula showed up, that suggestion had no teeth. I could hear regular gasping, "Horrors!" or "How can it get any worse?" and "Well, I never!" ending with, "Did you vote already?" "Yes, I've already voted," Mom reported, but added pensively, "Does my vote count if I'm dead?"

After each visit, she beckoned her friends to peruse the garage where she had tastefully arranged various jewelry, scarves, crystal dishes, ceramic napkin holders from Spain, alongside collectibles from her shelves. "You must find something you want. It is my gift to you and I don't want Janet to have to deal with all of this stuff!" she finished emphatically.

Mom was hosting her own Celebration of Life. What good are stories told over an urn, when you can hear them yourself, laughing, crying and holding court right in your own condo? She distributed chocolates and invited them to sign her guestbook, a ritual dating from the 1950s.

Today, things slowed down – a lot. Yesterday, despite CDC guidelines, we gathered for an early Thanksgiving. My daughter-in-law, Cindy, prepared the entire feast, transferring it four hours from her kitchen to Mom's. We used the good silver with seasonal paper plates. My son, Greg, read the prayer traditionally shared by my father. Mom, the matriarch, was losing her voice.

After lunch, Greg shared some "Hamilton" tunes with his grandmother and Cindy sent me to the basement with Ella, 11, and James, 7. Who knew that a flashlight, a yardstick and a Jell-O mold could be a campfire, sword and helmet? For a few hours, Mom and I escaped into a playful world of make-believe.

Reality returned the next day complete with a fall on the bathroom floor, the change from cane to walker and an additional syringe of morphine – a foreshadowing into that foggy future of de-

terioration. I corralled my thoughts and tried to lock them away.

The jingle of my maid's bell brought me back.

"Would you bring me yesterday's mail and my checkbook?" she managed to croak through a dry throat. "I want to donate to the Alzheimer's Walk. And, I need the address for that prayer chain letter."

I look at her. This woman, still guiding me through the paths of life. I'm so grateful. This is a sacred time to prepare and celebrate.

We know how this story will end for her; we just don't know when.

Hospice. Bon Voyage. A day at a time. Bon Voyage. ■



Jan's roots are in the north country, but Spanish continues to add extra dimensions to her life's journey. Since retiring from teaching Spanish, her travels cycle between family, the Wisconsin cabin and the occasional foray across borders. She is writing a book about the surprising places and unexpected adventures opened to her by virtue of speaking Spanish. Find her writings at: [www.janetkurtz.com](http://www.janetkurtz.com).



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