

## The APE Life - Carolyn Hukle Eulogy

Norwalk Christian Church, Jan 3, 2020

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We were under no illusion that Carolyn would be here forever. But we sure hoped that she would.

Last Friday before she died, Marti asked Carolyn, “Are you ready?” She immediately said yes. She was having trouble saying some things, but this came out easy. Then she continued, saying what I’ve heard her say a hundred times before: “I told the Lord that when he needed another tenor in his heavenly choir to call me home, and I’ll be ready.”

Carolyn was ready. But that doesn’t mean that we were.

How *could* we be? Carolyn had a way with us. She found *us*. She befriended *us*; endeared herself to *us*; grabbed a hold of us and added us to her life.

Someone with the funeral home remarked, “This probably won’t be a big service, since a lot of her friends are already gone.” I laughed out loud! Carolyn made new friends last week! When we went to visit her after she had gone into the hospital, she was going on about Karla, one of our newest church members, and how much she liked her.

She knew your name, and kids’ names, parents’ names, and pet’s name, too. Whether she just met you or knew you your whole life, she made you feel so very special.

Carolyn loved us all. We knew this day would eventually come, even if we wondered aloud if she would outlive us all. But it still doesn’t make this easy.

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She certainly had her share of medical scares. I remember the first time I went to visit her before surgery, and she talked through her medical history. I heard it. all. Every surgery. Every replacement part. It was a little embarrassing, for me, not Carolyn.

But I soon realized, you didn’t have to be in her surgery room to hear it all. Talk to her long enough, you’d learn all about her medical history and those names: There was Miss Piggy, her pig heart replacement valve; Vinny, her colostomy bag; and, of course, her cane, Illeen Parker Hunter, because, “*Illeen* on her, but then I can’t remember where I *Parker*, so I have to go *Hunter*.”

Carolyn is also the only person I’ve met who died twice. She probably told you about that, too. Before her open-heart surgery she was really scared, worrying mostly about her family, if anything were to go wrong. But during the surgery, she remembered looking at herself with the medical team working on her. And then a hand being given to her and her taking it. The hand belonged to a very tall man with dark skin, dressed in white. With her hand in his, they walked down the hallway together. She wasn’t in any pain. She wasn’t worried about her family or anything. She was at peace, the most

peaceful feeling she's ever had. And then she was shocked back to life and immediately found herself back on the table in pain. She was so glad to have more time with her family and friends, but she was never, again, afraid of death.

"I have been there before," she told Marilyn right before she died, "I know what it's like, and it's wonderful."

She was prepared for death, but Carolyn still knew how to live--every moment to the fullest. If Carolyn was in the room, chances are she was the life of that room.

You heard about her APE plan. Attitude. Portion Control. Exercise, her three essentials for living a long, healthy, happy life. APE was the way she organized her life, and, you know, I can't think of a better way to organize her Eulogy, than by the APE plan. First...

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### **A-Attitude:**

Oh boy, did Carolyn have attitude. In her last days, when she struggled with words, her one eyebrow could still raise up, giving us that look. Even the night before she died, I said something ornery to her, and she immediately stuck out her tongue at me.

This attitude began at an early age. Carolyn was a twin, but she always made sure you knew she was the oldest. She was our oldest church member, and Marilyn was a distant second.

Carolyn told me how at every year at Christmas, her parents would get chocolates from Meredith and put it in their bedroom. The kids really wanted it, but her parents' door squeaked loudly. So they devised a plan. Carolyn would play the piano loudly, and Marilyn would sneak upstairs and get the candy out for all the siblings.

In high school, Carolyn was the cheerleader and Marilyn was the basketball player. They both played clarinet, and both loved to sing. Carolyn loved music--it filled her heart. The three sisters sang in a trio often, and, according to Carolyn, always won the talent show, then blew all the winnings at the ice cream store in town.

And when they moved to Norwalk, Carolyn joined our church choir at age 12, holding together that tenor section for 83 proud years.

Carolyn said that the Wood kids all pretty much grew up on the Racoon River bank. They'd camp on the sandbar almost every weekend wading into the river to fish for catfish and stuffing their bras with stink bait. It took a while, she said, but they eventually got used to the smell.

She loved going bowling every Friday night with her family, and every summer they caught the train in Norwalk and road it all the way to the Iowa State Fair, hanging out in the horse barns, she said, because that's where the cute boys were.

They went often to their grandparents house and nursery, Sayers Nursery, in Des Moines. They would speedily rollerskate from her Grandparent's house on Watrous on the paved roads all the way to the drug store on Park Avenue, where they'd order a cold, tall rootbeer. They would ride from the nursery to her grandparents' brick house on Fluor, sitting on the fender of her Granpee's truck, hanging onto the headlights.

If one of her siblings were someplace in the nursery and the others didn't know where, they'd give a loud yell, and the other would give the yell back.

This is where Carolyn developed, what she proudly called, her "Grandma yell." That's how her kids knew when it was time to come home. She'd yell, and they'd come running. There wasn't a corner of Norwalk where you couldn't hear her yell.

*You may not realize this, but Carolyn was actually the first tornado siren in Norwalk.*

From an early age, Carolyn learned how to have fun and adventure.

She especially loved her adventurous trips later in life: camping in Arizona with Alan, and her trip to Turkey, where she went to the ancient Biblical sites where the Apostle Paul visited. And there were trips to Canada with Tony and Delane, Marilyn and Warren, Grace and Walley, and many others. In Canada, they'd stay at Pakuni Lodge, where Carolyn was famous for catching the largest Walleye ever there. 9 pounds! It took two people to hold it up, and they named the place where she caught it, "Auntie Carol Beach". She took that prize Walleye home, and had him stuffed and hung on her wall. One time, when Susie was dusting, it fell off the wall and broke. Carolyn told me she had to throw it away, but when they were cleaning out her house, guess what was still there.

Carolyn loved to fish, a love she passed on to all her kids and grandkids.

Of course, we all knew, her favorite trips were to Disney World. She loved Disney. She went when she was 83. And then again when she was 90 and 93. Her 90th birthday trip was the best, with all her kids there. She was--of course--the life of the park, wearing everywhere a birthday hat with candles sticking out the top of it. Disney was the perfect place for Carolyn, because it displayed her attitude for life, fun, and adventure.

As her family wrote in her life story, she had a 100% positive attitude. She always saw the good: in a situation. In herself. In Alan. In her kids and grandkids. In us all.

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### **P-Portion Control:**

I never understood this point in the plan, because until she moved to Edencrest, Carolyn was always *over*-feeding us sweets! Maybe this is why we assumed she'd outlive us, because she fed us a lot more than she fed herself!

If you ever ate something Carolyn baked, raise your hand. That is how she told you she loved you. Pies. Cookies. Pork n' bean bars. And Peanut Brittle--which she brought every year to the annual church Tuesday Coffee white elephant gift exchange, always the most fought over item.

She would time her baked item to come out of the oven just in time, so she could still bring it warm to Tuesday Coffee every week. Her pies were incredible, every kind of fruit pie imaginable. We had a pie auction fundraiser one year at church, and I won her strawberry-Rhubarb pie, for \$100! And it was worth every dollar.

She always had fresh cookies ready for the church kids when they came to carol for her every Christmas, and we had to call ahead so they would be fresh out of the oven. It's no secret why all our church kids adored this woman.

Marti asked her a few times when she was in the hospital, "Carolyn, what was your favorite thing that you baked?" She never answered. But when we were visiting with her the night before she died, Kim Ward rephrased the question: "Carolyn, what was your favorite pie?" And she immediately said, "Plum. It tastes soooo good."

It was hard to maintain portion-control when Carolyn was baking.

If you knew her twin, Marilyn, you knew that Marilyn had a 4pm cocktail hour. Well, one birthday, I think it was their 94th, we went to visit both twins separately. And Carolyn complained to us about how Marilyn stays up too late and has too many cocktails. And then we went to see Marilyn, and Marilyn complained to us about how Carolyn wakes up too early and spends too much money at the Casino and Racetrack.

She did love playing the slots and then betting on the horses. She'd read up on the horses and pick her favorite, betting never more than a few dollars--always controlling those portions.

But her favorite past time was playing board games and cards, especially cribbage. At the 30 & 1 Church game nights, she often played dominoes. She was always willing to play a game with you. If you ever played cards or dominoes with Carolyn, raise your hand. And if you ever beat her, keep your hand up.

Oooo, she didn't like it when you beat her. We knew something was up, when just a couple of weeks ago, Craig beat her in Cribbage, and even skunked her 3 times, winning a whopping \$2.04! This was rare, indeed. Carolyn did not like losing. But, when she did, she was a fair loser. Even if it was just a quarter or dime that she owed you and you said, "Don't worry about it," she always insisted on paying out, to the very last cent!

Carolyn loved to talk about her and Alan's modest home in Norwalk. The first "new home" in Norwalk, that tiny Lustron enameled, steel house. It arrived in pieces, assembled on their lot on Elm Street. At first they couldn't get a home loan because it

wasn't a "stick house". It was all metal! But they eventually talked the bank into it, and lived in it for 67 years, raising four kids, and building an even tinier mother-in-law house in the back yard where Alan's mom lived, and others, even for a time the Mayor of Norwalk. Carolyn called it "the only hotel in Norwalk."

Neighborhood kids always came over to the Hukles', and she and Alan always hosted family and friends in the front yard for the annual 4th of July parade. And on her 80th year, Carolyn and Marilyn even got to be the grand-marshals of the parade!

They could've easily afforded a bigger house. But portion-control! Carolyn lived within her means, and loved that tiny, unique house, which was always filled with love.

I never got to meet the love of Carolyn's life, Alan, but I heard a lot about him. Our church's previous pastor, Dayna, sent me the eulogy she wrote for Alan. She tells of how Alan and Carolyn met: "It was at a Meredith Christmas party that Alan happened to notice a beautiful pair of legs walking up the stairs in front of him and he decided he had to meet the beautiful woman attached to those legs. Alan took Carolyn home from that party and [then] announced to his mother, 'I just met the woman I'm going to marry.'"

Alan joined the Army during World War 2, and while deployed wrote Carolyn a letter, asking her to marry him. Two weeks later, he got a letter back with a "Yes!" Two weeks and two days after he returned, they were married in our old church building.

Carolyn loved Alan, and he her. He loved to cook for her, and the rumor is that Alan gained 30 pounds their first month of marriage. Perhaps that's when she first learned the benefits of portion control.

In 2005, the kids arranged a 60th anniversary party for them, a little early, just three months before Alan died. I'm told there wasn't a dry-eye in the house when Alan proposed to her again, this time in person.

Carolyn and Alan shared a life of love, and that love poured out to their children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren--and everyone they met.

Thank you, Carolyn, for teaching us that when it comes to sweets, drinks, purchases, gambling, and other excesses in life--portion control is a must. But when it comes to love--of life and of others--never hold back.

### **E-Exercise:**

From the first time I met Carolyn, I knew--she could, at any moment, take me down. I knew it, because she told me. She'd proudly talk about her "Lady Stay Alive!" program, where she travelled Iowa and surrounding states teaching women self-defense skills. She taught women how to take a man down with one hand. "You lead a man anywhere with his thumb," she'd say. Or, it only takes seven pounds of force to break the top of a

foot. Oh, and if a man is attacking you, knee him in his “safety deposit box” if you have to.

There is a lovely photo published in the Des Moines Register in 1980 of her giving her demonstration at the Iowa State Fair, and taking down a volunteer, Chuck Grassley, then only a candidate for Senate. I think she’s the last person to ever take Senator Chuck Grassley down. When they republished the photo in 2017, and she brought the paper to church, just gleaming.

The original article speaks of the 57-year old grandma, and reads, “Holy Hubert Horatio Hornblower! Carolyn Hukle, of Norwalk, teaches women how to defend themselves. She was giving a demonstration Sunday afternoon on the Grand Concourse stage and, for some reason, Grassley agreed to play the part of the attacker while she played the attackee. “This just proves even Chuck Grassley lets his hair down sometimes,” said his news secretary Mike Kelly. “I’m sure that the staff person who scheduled this appearance won’t hear the end of it for a long time... I hear [Grassley] got pushed around quite a bit’ by Grandma Hukle.”

Once, she was driving on Fleur Drive, she heard on the police scanner that Dahl’s was just robbed. She looked up, and there was the car in front of her, with a rag over the license plate. She radioed that she was following them, almost got hit by him, and chased him all the way to Norwalk where he was apprehended by the police.

People loved and feared Grandma Rambo. She was tough, exercising several times a week until around age 95. But we all knew, her true strength came from her faith. She exercised her faith on a regular basis. If she wasn’t in church on Sunday, you knew she was either in Colorado visiting Roger or sick.

A Choir member, an elder, deacon. She was asked once by Betty Williams to lead CYF, the Christian Youth Fellowship/High School group, and Carolyn said, “I don’t think I know enough about the Bible to do that,” and Betty said, “well, good, you can learn with the kids.”

She did that for six years. “I think it’s something the Lord wanted me to do,” she said. She also said that’s where she got her gray hair. They called her, “Mother Superior” and they were her “Monsters”. She took them to worship services at different churches and once to a Bat Mitzvah at the synagogue. She’d often throw the kids across the room for fun, and if a new kid arrived, the others would tell her, “Show them what you can do.” She even took them to juvenile and adult court, and once shut a group inside a jail cell. She had connections with the police, she said, and she could do whatever she wanted.

Carolyn gave so much to this church. She met visitors on their first visit, and never forgot their names. She told people everywhere about her church. She was our biggest cheerleader, even telling Marti and I like a dozen times when she was dying, “I love you guys.”

On her last Sunday worshipping with us, December 22nd, I was doing the Children's sermon, and we were going on a journey around the Sanctuary like the Wisemen, looking for Jesus. I stopped in front of Carolyn and asked the kids, "Wait, is this Jesus?" The whole church laughed because, well, Carolyn may have known Jesus when they were kids. But, honestly, I can't think of a better description of her than Jesus.

Carolyn showed us what being Christ-like looked like. And it was no accident. Carolyn worked at her faith. She exercised. She wasn't perfect, but she was, for us, about as good example as we can get of the God-like love described in 1 Corinthians 13. She showed us love. She taught us how to love.

The church is a body with many parts, the Apostle Paul wrote a chapter later. Carolyn was the heart of this church. Her love of God, of life, and of everyone of us, shaped us. Visitors and new members have said, "This is the friendliest church we've ever been to." It's largely because of Carolyn. She was our heart. Her fingerprints are everywhere in this place, and we are really going to miss her.

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Yes, we were under no illusion that Carolyn would be here forever. And yet, everywhere we look, there she still is. In the stories, the laughter, the love. In her church, her friends, and most certainly in her beautiful family. She was so very proud of you all and never glowed brighter than when she was talking about her kids and grandkids. Thank you for sharing her with us.

Indeed, the legacy of Grandma Rambo lives on!

She told me, just after Marilyn died, "I don't know what's going to kill me. But it will probably be my heart." The ironic thing is, her heart was the last to give out. Even on her last day, her heart kept beating strong, her hands warm with blood flow.

Her heart may have been her weakest body part, but it was also her strongest. With every one of us she added to her life, her heart was exercised with love.

She lived a great life--not by accident, but on purpose. She decided, long ago, this is how her life would go. And she worked at it, having a positive attitude, controlling those portions, and always exercising--her body, her faith, and her love.

And her way can be ours, too, if we, like her are intentional about it. She loved the APE plan, because it was so simple, and she told everyone about it, because she wanted us all--the people she loved--to have such a wonderful, full life like she did.

At the hospital, Marti asked her if she had any words of advice for us. And she said, without hesitation, "Be true to yourself, and don't let anyone..." She couldn't find the rest of her words, but we knew what she was saying.

Thank you, Grandma Rambo, for being true to *yourself*. Thank you for never letting anyone keep you from being what you were called to be. Thank you for sharing your beautiful life with us.

It was truly an honor, and we love you and we will miss you so very much. Now go join that heavenly choir, and sing your heart out.

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I'd like to now invite Carolyn's granddaughter, Stefani Hille up, to share and introduce a video she made for Carolyn. After the video, the choir will sing for us Carolyn's favorite song, one she insisted they sing every year when their choir season began.