

LIVES LIVED

Joan Thornton

Wife, mother, friend, mentor,
parent educator. Born May 28, 1940,
in London, Ont. Died March 5 in
Toronto, of heart failure, aged 61.

Born to Annie and Donald MacArthur in London, Joan was younger than her brother, John. After completing high school, Joan embarked on her nursing career, first studying at the Woodstock General Hospital and then the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. Always a teacher and healer of both body and soul, she applied her nursing skill to the physical illnesses of others while her compassion inspired her healing nature.

Within a day of moving to the big city, she attended the wedding of a friend and met Ron Thornton, a friend of the groom. He crossed the dance floor to ask her to dance, a request declined by Joan as she was experiencing extreme physical pain from rheumatoid arthritis.



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He asked for her phone number and she again gently discouraged him with the response that she did not have a telephone as she had just moved into her apartment. Undaunted, Ron persisted and, with her address in his hand, their courtship began. They embarked on their happy 38-year marriage in 1964.

Their first daughter, Catherine Joan, was born Sept. 1, 1967, and after many a move from Ottawa to Toronto for Ron's work with the Supreme Court of Ontario, they settled in Toronto and welcomed their second daughter, Gail Elizabeth, born July 12, 1973.

Joan quickly became involved in the community. Upon attending her first Home and School meeting she was elected president with the charge of forming a parent study-group. Infant in hand, she went to the first gathering of this study group out of interest and was immediately attracted to the discussion involving equality and respect for children and parents.

In the early 1970s, Joan initiated the creation of the Etobicoke Family Life Education Council (EFLEC) now known as the Parent Education Network. She dedicated countless volunteer hours to its development in order to help other parents with the most important job in their lives: raising their children. Those of us who were participants in courses under her leadership learned vital skills — to treat our children with respect and to eliminate family conflict. Her subtle sense of humour and perspective on life's challenges altered our outlook and benefited our children.

From 1974 to 1991, she had an impact on the lives of thousands and her legacy and influence have moved into a third generation. One of her former participants, Annie Appleby, shared this story: Annie's son is currently volunteering with children with developmental disabilities. His manner and language with them are so unusually respectful in a young man of his age that his teacher, Gail Thornton (yes, Joan's daughter), asked him how he came to know how to deal with situations so effectively. His answer was "My mom is an EFLEC person."

Thousands have taken courses and workshops to improve communication skills that benefit them in their home, work, and personal lives and they have no idea that Joan Thornton was the person to thank.

Joan endured physical suffering for much of her life with crippling rheumatoid arthritis and only left EFLEC after discovering cancer and undergoing major surgery in 1991. Throughout her physical trials, she maintained the most amazing positive outlook — joy in life, strong family ties, a wise approach to problems and good humour. Her husband Ron has told me that Joan, impatient with indecision, would often simply use her favourite saying: "Just deal with it."

These aspects of Joan's personality were with her to her last day prior to succumbing to heart failure. She left a legacy of helping others and her influence will continue through the generations by way of those of us she so ably advised.

Katy Anderson

Katy was a friend of Joan Thornton.