

Joan Dietmann, 94, written by her daughter, Elizabeth Williamson, for her NYTimes colleagues:
(Elizabeth is Jennifer's nephew, Paul Nevin's partner)

My mother, Joan Dietmann, died this morning. She was healthy for most of her 94 years and even in decline rallied more than once, fitting for a woman who lived life with her dukes up.

Joan Halper was born in 1929 to a dashing man in the construction business and a cheerful, somewhat feckless former flapper who named her after Joan Crawford. Her Chicago story is cinematic, unless you lived it. Her paternal grandparents founded a construction company that employed her father and most of the family, in an era when "you couldn't drive a nail without a nod from the syndicate," as one of my uncles told me. Tales from that time are...a lot.

Joan was a sly wit, omnivorous reader and self-taught financial savant who with the help of an uncle bought her first stock at age 12. It's family legend that she registered herself for first grade, when nobody else did. It proved good practice for raising her two younger siblings while her father drank and her mother lived by the motto "your bed is your best friend."

Joan worked in Chicago's Victory Gardens during WWII, and after high school achieved what Michael Corleone only dreamed of by shedding most family ties and going to work as a telephone operator for Illinois Bell. (She still holds AT&T stock.) At age 27 she married my father, Walter Dietmann, a pipefitter whose immigrant parents owned a diner on the South Side. Mom never attended college, a disappointment for her. But she financed the construction of my parents' first home (built without family help). My favorite image of her is at a party in that house. She's wearing an emerald taffeta dress she made herself, cinched in at her tiny waist, her dark hair curling at the nape of her neck. I have her sewing machine, and the bobbins are still strung with bright colors from the clothes and costumes she made us.

Mom and my dad, who died in 1996, saw all three of their children graduate college, and she saw two finish grad school (I'm the slacker). She never boasted about our achievements in our presence and shushed anyone who did, but she was proud. We did not learn the details of her early life until we had children of our own. Thanks to her longevity we had time to understand, and to see her drop her guard. Her last good day was Christmas, spent with most of her eight grandchildren. For that and many other things we are grateful.

Elizabeth