

Invisible Work **A tribute to Jean Guttman**

If you wander in the great temperate rain forests in Olympic National Park, you will find yourself in a landscape that seems almost magical, with ancient Sitka spruces, hemlocks, red cedars and Douglas firs. The living trees have moss and ferns and lichens as festoons and the light filtering through the dense canopy above has an almost mystical green. And on the floor are giant logs from fallen trees which act as nurse logs. These logs, as they decay slowly, become the home for a whole ecosystem of mosses, fungi, new seedlings, insects and amphibians. It takes a log almost as long to decay as it did to grow the trees which are often several hundred years old. These nurse logs not only become the nurseries for new trees, they also affect the entire ecosystem, though work that is largely invisible. When they fall across a stream they slow it down, and create resting pools for adult salmon and juveniles. When mammals eat the salmon, they bring nutrients from the ocean to the forest floor. It is a vast and complicated web of life.

Great trees spread their seeds and create new life on the earth. How do you measure the impact of a life? How do you measure the impact of Jean Guttman's life? An obvious way is to look to her family. She took immense pride in her three children, seven grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. All of them were the recipients of her love and care, her wisdom and devotion, and of her generosity. These were her scions, if you will, but in addition to these she had many, many other children.

Nurse logs create an environment to support many other kinds of life: moss and ferns, lichens and fungi, helping build a rich ecosystem. As a volunteer she was a Visiting Mom for many years, first in White Plains, NY and then in Newton, MA. Each year she mentored a few new mothers and their babies and toddlers, bringing a book or an educational toy with each visit. She provided support for exhausted mothers and gently modeled for them the principles of progressive education which she had learned at Bank Street School in NYC. Her favorite place to be was down on the floor with young children, and she spent many an hour playing with them: crawling in and out of a refrigerator box which had been turned into a playhouse for a grandchild, or building a tower with blocks to be knocked down over and over again. Every child with whom she played thought she was their very own Grandma Jean. Over the years the families she visited through the program continued to be her friends, and stayed in touch even as the toddlers grew to be college students.

As they decompose nurse logs provide a rich soil full of nutrients. In addition to children, Jean loved books, especially children's books. She volunteered at the Mason Rice library for many years and was loved by kids, librarians, teachers and parent volunteers. The librarian who has worked with Jean for many years said "She was a role model for me in many ways, showing how age does not define a person. Her mind was as sharp as a tack. She often found the mislabeled books and other inconsistencies. ...I have a lasting image of her on her hands and knees shelving books at 94! She was so generous with her time and with her heart." Jean also volunteered at the Newton Free Library, shelving books and then later, mending books so they could have a few more years circulating amongst readers. She spent time looking for the right book for the right child. And for her every child was the right child, and the book she chose was the right book.

Nurse logs are magnanimous in the ecosystems they create and are hosts to seeds from other trees, to little ferns and mosses, to insects and to amphibians and mammals. Jean supported not just her own children and grandchildren but any with whom she came in contact. Certainly all the families and children she touched through her teaching and volunteer work, all the children with whom she interacted in the library, the children at Waltham Early Intervention. All the

children in her vast circle of friends and family who were greeted at birth with books from Jean. She loved giving them her favorite books: Goodnight Moon, Pat the Bunny, Backwards Day, Corduroy. Often these were accompanied by a soft blanket or stuffed animal, which sometimes became “loveys” that children carried around for years.

Trees support other trees, in ways often unseen by human eyes, sharing nutrients through their root systems with other trees. Jean was a support to many friends in many parts of the world, and they in turn, nourished her. In her late 80s she braved traffic on Boston parkways to visit an old friend who was struggling with Alzheimers, playing scrabble with her, bringing her books and newspaper articles. If you were once a friend of Jean’s you were always a friend of Jean’s. She had friends on the west coast, in Europe, and in England and up to the age of 90 she visited them each year. When friends who were her peers died, she stayed friends with their children, sharing their joys and sorrows as though she were their parent. The in-laws of her children immediately became her family and they in turn were so grateful that their children were now part of the wider circle of care and love that Jean created around her. Once my parents, who lived in India, had met Jean and Allan, they knew that I would forever be loved and supported by her and her family.

When they fall across a stream they slow it down, and create resting pools for adult salmon and juveniles. In her life Jean often provided shelter literal and figurative to others. The young man from Laos who still calls her “mom” came from the refugee camps to Jean and Allan’s home. He lived with them until he had learned English and acquired life skills that allowed him to become a contributing citizen. Over the years she opened her home to people who had hit a difficult phase in life, providing a shelter for a period of time. She kept her eye and heart on those whom others might find more challenging to love and support.

These nurse logs not only become the nurseries for new trees, they also affect the entire ecosystem though that is largely invisible. Jean’s generosity of spirit was remarkable and contagious. She always saw the best in any person who was with her, and people rose to that best version of themselves when they were with her. Truculent children grew into their shining best selves with Jean as she sat on the floor with them. She often quoted what she had learned at Bank Street School : “Remember, the child is doing the very best they can.” Each of the vast number of people she interacted and called to be their best selves are Jean’s children. The unseen and unheard recipients of her generosity will pass on her spirit of acceptance, love and generosity through the world, though often without even knowing that they are doing so, in ways that may be invisible, but vast in their reach.

*From a grateful daughter-in-law and daughter-in-love
Kalpana Guttman*