

HOW WE GOT THROUGH: VOICES OF OUR ELDERS

An Everyday Boston series

Pamela Taylor, of Dorchester

INTERVIEWED BY UNIQUE WASHINGTON,
NEW MISSION HIGH SCHOOL

Unique: As soon as your mom passed away, how was that like for you? How was the passing of a loved one?

Pamela: It was the most difficult experience of my life. My mother died the end of October of last year.

Unique: Oh, wow.

Pamela: She had just turned 93. So she lived a long life. My mother...the absence of her has been overwhelming for me.

She was an only child. And she and my grandmother owned a home together. So when my grandmother died about 15 years ago, my mother was so traumatized because she had never ever lived alone. And she didn't have any brothers and sisters.

So what she did (laughs), she showed up at my house one day--people laugh at this story, I kind of always laugh at it too.

So mom spent a lot of time the last two years of my grandmother's life taking care of her. My grandmother had Alzheimer's. Do you know what that is?

Unique: Yes.

Pamela: And when my grandmother went into her last stage of Alzheimer's, which is the worst stage, my mother quit her job to stay home because my grandmother kept wandering outside, and we always had to send the police looking for her. So my mother and I shared taking care of her.

And then when my grandmother died, my mother was really, really all alone. Because she had no brothers and sisters, and she was used to sharing the home with her mother.

So she showed up one day, and she rang the doorbell, and I opened the door, and there she was!

Literally. She had a suitcase on the porch, and her little portable TV in her hand, and she said, "I'm coming to live with you."

Unique: (Laughs).

Pamela: (Laughs). Now, I was stunned. Because my mother and I--I don't know if you have experienced this as a daughter living with your mother, but typically mothers and daughters struggle. They have this thing going on.



And my mother and I ALWAYS used to get into tiffs and arguments. She was strong-willed, very bossy. She wanted perfect kids--a perfect daughter and a perfect son--and we just...we loved each other, but we just couldn't get along.

So when I bought my house, and I moved into it, I had freedom! I said, "This is my house, I can be the boss of my house."

And I lived in my house alone for about 15 years. I loved to entertain. And then here she comes with her TV and suitcase, and she says, "I can't stand living alone. I'm going to live with you."

So what was I to do? You know, I had four bedrooms, and it was just me (laughs), so of course, I said, "Okay!"

Unique: Right!

Pamela: It's funny because I guess I've always been the strong one in the family. I've always been the independent one. My mother never had to worry about me. She always had to worry about my brother because he did stupid things! And he always got into..not bad trouble where he went to jail, but he was just mischievous. He was mischievous after school, he was mischievous in school.

Me, I was just straight and narrow. Always the good kid.



So when I first bought the house, and I walked around and I looked at it, I said, "Wow, this is kinda big." And the real estate woman said, "Is it just you? Do you have any children?" I said, "No."

But you know, something in my head, in my heart, told me, "You know, this is okay. I can turn one room into an office, one room into a guest room, so that leaves two other rooms that I can put a sleeping couch in-- or, my mind said, if something ever happened to my family members, they can always come and stay with me.

So that day came! And I gave her the biggest room, which has two big windows. It already had an old bed in it and an old bureau and a big closet. So when she moved in, all she had to do was unpack her suitcase and put her little TV on top of the bureau. But over time, she bought a brand new bedroom set--very pretty--and she made the room her own, and it took on her personality.

Like I said, she was with me for the past 15 years. So when she died--and she had Alzheimer's and heart disease--the last five years she was very ill, and I was the one who took care of her. And I was what they call her primary caregiver. So I spent a lot of time with her--a lot of time taking care of her.

And she had a lot of needs. She had to put on oxygen sometimes to help her breathe. I had to learn to do that. And I had to get what they call a potty for her bedroom. I had to help her on and off of it.



And you know, it was just like she was in the hospital. I had to help her wash up in the morning, to bring her meals from the kitchen up to the bedroom. So it was a lot. And it kept me busy. And we grew closer and closer over those last five years while I was taking care of her.

And then she was on home hospice, so I no longer had to take her to the clinic or the hospital to really be seen. So I built a relationship with her hospice team, which was a nurse, a social worker, her doctor AND her home health aide, who was wonderful. I grew so fond of her.

When you're put on hospice, the doctors tell you, "Your loved one has 3-6 months to live." She went on hospice in April of 2019, and she died October 28, 2019. It was six months.

And her last two months, she really struggled. But her nurse said she was doing well.

And then one day, I woke up and did my regular routine, I went into her room and said, "Mummy, what do you want for breakfast?" She told me, and I went down and I fixed it. And came up, and we sat and we watched the morning show, and ate our breakfast together, which is what we do all the time.

Then I had to make a business call. And I said, "Well, mum, I gotta go make this business call. It'll take about a half hour. And then I'll come back and we'll work on your puzzle." She likes doing puzzles.



So I got on the business call, I finished it, and walked back into the bedroom, and I sat down in the chair--I had an E-Z chair next to her bed, which I sat in all the time--and I was talking, talking, talking. And then I said, "Okay, it's time to put on the TV program that we like."

And then I noticed she wasn't answering me. And I looked over, and I stared, and Unique, she had died quietly in her sleep.

Unique: Oh, wow.

Pamela: While I was on my phone call. And you know, it's funny--well, not funny, that's the wrong word. It's amazing because I looked at her and I said, "Oh, you couldn't pass away while I was here, so I could possibly help you. You had to wait until I left the room." And I went over to her, and I had a conversation, and I said, "I hope you died peacefully, mum."

And then I called the hospice clinic, because I had strict instructions. And they sent her hospice nurse over. She arrived within the hour.

I called my brother--he was at work. I was terrified to tell him because they were very close. My brother was my mother's favorite (laughs).

I spoke to him, and I said, "Listen. You settle down. She died peacefully. The nurse is here. I'm not alone. Get here as soon as you can." I said, "The funeral parlor will be here within the hour, and I want you to see her before they take her away."



And the day moved along. And Unique, the whole day, and for the next two days, I never cried.

I was just getting used to her absence. My sleeping pattern never changed, because my sleeping pattern was always based on her and her needs. So I always woke up between 5:30 and 6, checked on her, went down, turned up the heat, and started breakfast. Then came up, and woke her up, and that's when the day began.

And the reason I didn't cry was because I was the one, because I was the oldest, to take care of her estate, her will, her wishes in her will, and arrange her funeral, and call our out of town relatives. I was so busy taking care of the business of death and dying I didn't cry.

I would sometimes be sad and mournful. But I didn't cry. I didn't cry until the funeral.

Unique: I can definitely relate to something like that.

Pamela: You know, I had written comments about my mom, and I delivered them at the funeral. And there was a poem that I read, "I hope you dance." that I borrowed from my good friend's father's funeral. And I loved it because it was very meaningful. Because my mother was a dancer.

She loved to dance. She taught me how to dance. She sent me to dancing school at age 4, and I was in ballet slippers and toe shoes by the time I was age 5.



And she paid for all my beautiful costumes, and my recitals were a big day for her, and she and my grandmother and my aunt would come.

So when I read the poem, it reminded me so much of my mother's love for dance, and my love for dancing that I inherited from her, that I started crying.

And my brother, I watched him, he was sitting in the first row at church. And he looked at me, and his eyes got big, and I could see him panic, like "Oh, my god, my sister is breaking down."

And you know, he jumped up, ran up the stairs to the podium, and I kinda collapsed in his arms. And he kept saying, "Okay, take deep breaths, take deep breaths, you're gonna be alright, we're doing fine, you're gonna be alright."

And I peeked out and I saw alarm in all of my family's faces. Because they always knew me as, "Oh, Pamela's the tough one." And speaking to them prior to the funeral, I wasn't crying, I was all business like.

But I got through it, and that was the first time I cried.

So now, you know the hardest thing was, she died the end of October, and that was just before the BIG holidays of Thanksgiving and Christmas. And those were very hard for me. Because all I had left of my little family was my brother.



And we used to do up Thanksgiving and Christmas really big. So my mourning got really tough at Thanksgiving and Christmas.

It started lessening after the New Year. And then starting February, I removed my mother's things from her bedroom. I gave some stuff away. I took her beautiful carved jewelry box and I put it in my room. I removed all the photos that were in her room of me and my brother at different ages and I put them back into my bedroom. I haven't put them up yet because I want shelves built in my bedroom to put them on the shelves.

I opened up her closet and I said, "Oh my god!" My mother was a sharp dresser. She had more clothes than you would believe! T

I started out with her dresser and all the clothes in her drawers. A lot of them were gorgeous sweaters. My mother loved sweaters because she would wear them with her jeans.

I gave about 15 sweaters, about 15 turtlenecks, about 20 pairs of jeans--all different colors--to two teenaged girls down the street. My mother was petite. She was always size eight. These girls were in the 10th and the 12th grade in high school. And they were petite and thin. So I knew the stuff they could wear.



And one day I invited them up, and I put all the sweaters, turtlenecks, gorgeous knit sweaters, and all the jeans on the bed in piles. And I said, "Come on up! Bring bags! And go shopping!"

And they came up with their mother and they took all the stuff away. So that pretty much emptied out the clothes in her dresser and the bureau.

But the closet was another whole nightmare. But I pretty much emptied that out because much of the dresses and the suits are going to homeless shelters for women.

Unique: Wow, that's nice.

Pamela: So I packed them up in some old zip close bags because right now, the homeless shelters aren't accepting donations, you know, with the Covid-19? So they're all packed up in her closet. So I'm waiting for when this is all over. Once those places open up, I will finish cleaning out her closet.

So I think that's it. It's been a long mourning process, but I think I'm getting better.

My brother tells me I shouldn't have, but I wound up moving into her bedroom, cause her bedroom has a big TV in it and a bookcase with a lot of books. So I feel comfortable in here.



It kinda makes me feel closer to her. Because the chair I used to sit in is still there. And I have the company of turning on the TV during the day or at night, I turn on the 6 o'clock news. It actually keeps me company.

So I depend on that less now. Now I'm back to resuming my activity with all my clubs and organizations. I think I'm doing much better now. So thank you for asking.

I'm pretty proud of myself. My brother and I have grown closer together. Because actually, I've kind of taken the place of my mother for him (laughs). So that's it.

Unique: That was a very beautiful story. I don't want to take up any more of your time, or your day, so I just want to thank you for sharing your beautiful story with me.

Pamela: Thank you so much. It felt good talking to you. Like I said, I got so nervous, I said, "What do I say to someone in 10th grade? I haven't been in the 10th grade in ages."

Where does the name Unique come from? Are you named after anyone?

Unique: Well, technically, I'm named after my mom. My mom's name is Monique. So basically, my mom and my dad, they wanted to name our siblings, they always wanted a part of my mom's family and my dad's family. So my name is Unique Janelle Washington. Unique is from my mom,



Janelle is from my dad, and my last name is just because they were married, so it was my dad's last name.

Pamela: Is your father's name Janelle?

Unique: My father's middle name is Jerelle. So they thought it would be cute if my middle name was Janelle for his name.

Pamela: Oh, I get it!

Unique: Yeah, so it all goes together, so that I would always have a part of them.

Pamela: That's sweet. Okay, so we'll talk soon?

Unique: Yes, we will!

Pamela: Okay!

Unique: Thank you so much!

Pamela: You're welcome very much!





Pamela Taylor retired from Massachusetts General Hospital, where she worked as a Human Resources Manager supporting the research divisions across the hospital. A member of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, she is an avid reader, gardener and supporter of the arts. She is also a member of Boston City Councilor Andrea Campbell's Senior Ambassadors Council.

Unique Washington is a student at New Mission High School.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

During the pandemic, Everyday Boston is connecting elders with younger members of the community for recorded phone conversations about life- and how the elders got through tough times.

The “How We Got Through” project is designed to ease the burden of isolation for everyone involved, and to amplify the voices of our elders, who have always been our guides in life, and whose stories we rely on during challenging times.

Thank you to our partners on this interview: Cheryl Harding, Senior Advisor for Boston City Councilor Andrea Campbell, and Brinda Tahiliani, History Teacher at New Mission High School.

