

## **Eulogy for Helen Nelson, October 15, 2021**

**Dear family and friends of Helen,**

The Jaggiellonian University in the proud city of Krakow is the second oldest University in central Europe, founded in the 14th century by Casimir the Great. The University is a great distance from here and the Slavic tongue spoken there is difficult for us to decipher, all its consonants stacked together, daring foreigners to twist their tongues; but spoken by the Polish people it has great fluidity and sounds beautiful. Students from Dickinson College have gotten a taste of Slavic life, language and history since 2007, when an exchange program was endowed by the Copernicus Society between those two places of academic learning. It was one of many initiatives that Helen Nelson spearheaded happily and with a passion. After all, her father had family roots in Poland. Mr. Piszek began the tradition of philanthropy in the country of his ancestors. He cared for the Polish people, and so did his daughter Helen; and if anyone is listening to this livestream from the homeland of Pope John Paul II, we say: "Dzen Dobre!"

The life of our sister in Christ, Helen Nelson, cannot be told without mentioning the virtue of giving – first of all and above all, giving love and structure to her children – sometimes more structure than they liked, - giving support to the churches she belonged to and faithfully managing her father's foundation by giving to and supporting promising causes, not just here in our community but also abroad. I think the old patriarch would have been proud of his youngest daughter. And maybe, who knows, she is having lunch with him right now, telling him, "See dad, it was good that I got that business degree, wasn't it?" At the time, he had complained about her ambitious goals. "Why do you need to go to college?" he'd asked, resisting her plans. "Just work for me..." But see, Helen was very much like her dad. She had a strong will, a mind of her own and a sense of independence; she was driven, just like Ed Piszek Sr. Now, imagine the two of them having lunch together in heaven and the old man, transformed by his heavenly surroundings, mellowed by God's angels, nodding and saying, "You were right Helen. I'm proud you got that degree!"

Helen's life was like her father's in the sense that it cannot be told without mentioning the virtue of giving. Helen Nelson was a giver and she took to heart the word Jesus said, "To whom much is given, much is required." She heard those words and she answered the bell, giving happily. But it was more than a family tradition for her. It was a matter of her heart and soul, her faith.

Helen Piszek was born on August 8, 1952 at Norristown hospital. She was part of the second Piszek family. Her father always joked that he had two families, but only one wife. His first three children were two years apart each: Ann, Edward and George, the first batch. The other two came a good number of years later, straggling behind, seven years apart, Helen and Bill, the second batch. That's why, from the beginning, Helen was greeted by a busy household, a beehive of activity, a large nest that provided warmth and challenge, a place where every hand was needed and tables needed to be set. Often times, the lines between family and business were blurred. Between Mrs. Piszek's kitchen and Mrs. Paul's kitchen, who could tell the difference? Helen's mom was an excellent cook, an excellent hostess, a tradition that Helen surely continued and Erik can attest to that! So can many of you who are here today.

Before long, this little girl Helen was in the mist of all the commotion, breathing in the air of an industrious family and for the most part, loving it. Weeks of work were followed by weekend social activities with employees, pool parties, and the like. Every hand was needed, every potato needed to be peeled. It was a wonderful way of growing up. Not many children today have such a great sense of comfort, community and purpose that envelopes them from day one. In the Piszek family it was a given, and it formed the soul of the person we remember today.

Young Helen went to a Montessori School in Blue Bell, which she absolutely loved. It gave her a first taste of religion and instilled the importance of faith and spirituality in her. The school was situated on the grounds of a Lutheran Church, a harbinger of things to come. She continued her school education at Germantown Academy where she was in the first group of girls accepted into this former all boys school. After graduation she went

to Albright College in Reading. There, her eyes got stuck, not on the curriculum, not on the college campus, but on a good looking, easy going boy, a history student from Burlington, New Jersey. Well, in a matter of a few years this boy's career plans were history because he married Helen Piszek one month after her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, in September of 1973 and started working, where else but at Mrs. Paul's Kitchen, the family business. But he didn't put on the wedding ring without giving Helen a little bit of a hard time first... Erik told me not to tell the story, it would ruin his perfect Boy Scout Record, but I received permission from his daughter Beth and Helen also chimed in from above and said its o.k., he can take it...

The story goes like this... They met at a friend's party and started dating. Helen was a little bit more in the driver's seat, can you imagine? She was making plans, moving forward, while Erik was a little more laid back... "Not so fast, honey!" But he didn't quite know how to say it and so he had this brilliant idea, this genius ploy that maybe came from one of his ancient history books. They were supposed to go somewhere together and Erik, in a desperate attempt to slow the relationship down, let Helen know that he couldn't make it this time. "Why, Erik?" she asked. "Oh, my fiancé is coming for a visit," he said in search for a waterproof excuse. "Fiancé?" Helen was furious and definitely steaming, even more so when she discovered the truth after talking to one of his best friends. His friend said, "Erik doesn't have a fiancé! What's he talking about?" It took Helen only two weeks to speak to him again, which is truly impressive. And with that, they passed their first major test as a couple, the crisis of the phantom lady in Erik's life. Forty-eight years later, three children and two grandchildren later, after lots of love and work and fun and also sorrow, we can say that Helen made a sound decision to forgive this young man. They were married for better and for worse, in good times and in bad times, in sickness and in health, and she had the most reliable partner and the most dedicated caregiver one can possibly imagine. Erik took care of her throughout this difficult time of cancer treatments and physical decline. Nothing was too hard. Nothing could break his love and loyalty. She may have been the boss, but he was her rock!

During her early married life, Helen worked for the company in the mornings, running the Test Kitchen, and picked up her children from school in the afternoon, tending to their needs. When the company doors of Mrs. Paul's Kitchen closed, sadly, in 1982, she helped her father with the work of the Copernicus Society, a family foundation. When her father stepped back, she took the reins of the Society and became acting President and CEO. Sometime before that, she had obtained a Business Degree from Gwynedd Mercy University. One of her favorite projects during her time at the helm of the foundation was the endowment of a library at Community Partnership School in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. Since Helen loved reading and had a strong interest in education and helping disadvantaged children, this was one of the projects that were closest to her heart.

The Nelson family had a good life together. They went on holidays to Florida and Long Beach Island. Every New Year's Eve they hosted big parties with lots of friends. And even when Helen was diagnosed with colon cancer in 2013, she tried to make it as easy as possible on her family. She displayed her trademark positive spirit, believing that she could beat this disease, and she did. She recovered and had a few more good years during which, one Sunday morning, she and Erik showed up here at St. Peter's and gave us the pleasure of meeting them. Unfortunately, the disease came back with a vengeance in 2019. When I saw Helen the last time and we talked about the inevitable and her decision to go into Hospice Care soon, she said, "O well, at least now I am in the driver's seat and can plan my own funeral." It was vintage Helen. And when I saw all the hymns and the music she had selected for her funeral, I was once more assured that she was a woman of deep faith, because she selected pieces with devotional depth, some of which are not so well known anymore. In fact, she picked a lot of hymns from the German tradition.

Helen was a giver all of her life. Today it is time for us to give back to her an offering of Thanksgiving to her creator, an acknowledgment of the gift we all received through her, a joyful farewell to a person who looked at the bright side of life even when the shadows of the night were closing in on her. She was a giver to the very end, with those she loved always in her mind; and so, we give thanks to God for her. It's a wonderful thought that

some of the gifts she was able to make, like the library or the exchange program or other contributions, large and small, the bell tree she donated to our church, will keep on blessing those they were intended to benefit. And with every smile coming out of the face of one of the beneficiaries, she will smile right along, happy where she is.

At peace.

Amen