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My mother-in-love

by Sara Tusek

It's been said that we choose our friends, but we are given our family. In the case of my mother-in-law from my first marriage, Charlotte Fox Shepherd Gross, I was privileged to have both opportunities—she was given to me as my mother-in-law when I just becoming an adult, and later I freely chose her to be my mother-in-love.

Charlotte Fox was born in Brooklyn, New York to Russian Jewish parents, Ben and Leone. Both parents were born in Russia and came to the US as young people to find a better life. They married and began a family, which grew to three daughters: Charlotte, Elaine and Barbara. The Fox family prospered, as Ben used his financial and business skills in his ladies' apparel business.

Charlotte was a serious and studious girl, with a strong social conscience, who sought a solid education. She went to college at the State University of New York at Albany, where she met her first husband, George Shepherd. He was from Monticello, NY, in the Catskills, and was a student at nearby Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, NY. They married after graduation.

The War Years

During WWII, soon after they married, George was called into service with the US Army Corps of Engineers. He was stationed in the state of Mississippi, on a Mississippi River dredging operation. Charlotte and her new husband moved to a small town nearby. Charlotte, with her typical energy and interest in people, soon made friends, finding common ground rather than focusing on differences between her worldview and that of the people in a small sleepy town.

She tells a funny story about a rat that her husband chased through their rental house near the Mississippi River, yelling at it and threatening its life. He picked up his gun and shot that rat.

When he and Charlotte walked outside with the rat's dead body, their neighbors were gathered, wide-eyed, waiting to see just what body George was bringing outside—was it his wife? They heard the shouts and the gun, but didn't hear the part about the rat!

The Young Family

After the war, George and Charlotte returned to New York City, buying a home in a new neighborhood in Queens in 1952. Here, their children Robert and Sue were born and grew up. Charlotte still lives in that house.

Charlotte resumed her career as a classroom teacher, then made a career switch that influenced the rest of her life. She was asked to work with a group of low-income women who were trying to finish their high-school education.

Here Charlotte found her calling. She began to help the women with finding jobs and navigating the bureaucracy of New York City's many social welfare programs. She loved helping these women, finding it satisfying to connect people with opportunities. Charlotte expanded her knowledge of social services and kept on helping people professionally, to better their lives, for the rest of her career.

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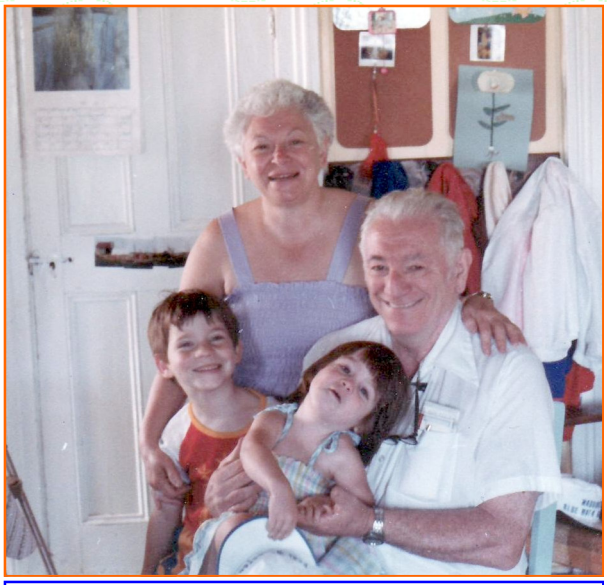
Career Change

I met Charlotte's son Robert when he and I were students at Hofstra University on Long Island, where his mother was also a student—not a freshman, as we were, but a Master's candidate in Rehabilitation Counseling. I first met her in the Hofstra cafeteria in 1969, and was immediately intrigued by her energy and confidence.



Noah, Charlotte, Melissa and Vic at the farm in Waddington

Charlotte graduated and took a job with Goodwill Industries, where she worked with clients who had all kinds of needs—to Charlotte, they were all "differently-abled," not disabled. She devoted her working life to helping people, developing an enviable Rolodex stuffed with the names of contacts in all parts of New York City society. She became the "go-to" person for just about any situation where help was called for.

Sue, Robert, Sara, Grandpa Fox, George and Charlotte in 1970

Second Generation

Robert and I got married in 1970 and produced our own two kids, Noah and Melissa. In the years of their growing up, George became very ill and passed away, a sad event for the entire family. One of the people who helped Charlotte adjust to single life was Vic Gross, a family friend from the days when Robert and Sue were young. Vic had lost his wife Shirley; the friendship between Vic and Charlotte ripened into love, and they were married. Later, Robert's sister Sue passed away , leaving the family with enduring memories of her talents and gentle nature. Robert and I grew in divergent paths and our marriage ended.

The Family Member I Chose!

And here is where the choice came in. Over the 15 years I had known her, I have grown to love and admire Charlotte as if she were my own mother—my "mother-in-love."

Her common-sense approach and lack of sentimentality in dealing with the most trying of circumstances has deeply affected me. Her encouragement and support in so many practical ways, especially as I completed my own university studies, has made the difference for me time and again. She's influenced my career choice (education) and has been a constant source of advice, as well as a gifted "sounding board" for my ideas.

I take off my hat to Charlotte for showing me a way to live that's filled with integrity and imagination. She has a gift for bringing out the best in people, and I, among so many, have benefited from that gift. She is a role model to me of a working woman who takes care of her family while doing important, meaningful work that results in change for the better.

Charlotte was my mother-in-law for 15 years, and my mother-in-love for 23 more years. I thank her for her sound advice and sensible example in all these years.

Charlotte and Sara in Waddington, NY, in 1982

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