

Bernie Caron
4/28/28 - 7/1/07

We are here today to celebrate the remarkable life of Bernie Caron. On behalf of his family, I want to share with you some of the details of his life.

Bernie was born in 1925 and was shaped by the Depression. He worked all of his life, beginning at age 12 with his first job at Mrs. McDuff's store weeding for 20 cents an hour. At age 14, he sold ice cream from a pony cart. During high school, he was Treasurer of his Senior Class and fullback on the championship football team. During his senior year, he worked the 3-11 pm shift and gave the money to his mother.

He graduated from Peabody High School in 1943 on a Sunday, and on Monday he entered the Navy. He was seasick every single day in the Navy, but he endured. He returned from the Navy on a Tuesday and learned that his parents had opened Caron's Diner on Bridge Street in Salem. He of course went to work on Wednesday. The Diner became a local institution, known for "Bernie's Famous Home Fries."

Bernie married Thelma Nyman on the night of her graduation in 1949 from Kathleen Dell secretarial school. In their early years of marriage, Bernie and Thelma lived in Peabody and Beverly Farms. They bought their home on Highland Avenue in September 1955 for \$9,400. They paid it off in 20 years.

Bernie was appointed to the Salem Police Department in 1960. He continued to work at the Diner as well. When I was growing up, it seemed like my father literally worked all the time. My sister and I can still remember our mother saying, "Shhh – Daddy's sleeping."

He later stopped working at the Diner and worked double shifts in the police department to support his family. He rose through the ranks, ultimately becoming a Captain. He went to college on a part-time basis – although there were easier options, he commuted to Northeastern for night classes, eventually earning bachelor's and master's degrees in Criminal Justice. After my sister and I moved away, Bernie and my mother bought a second home in Maine 1986.

My mother became ill with emphysema, and my father retired from the police department in 1990. He cared for her until her death in 1992. My mother and father had had a third child – a daughter Jayne who died shortly after birth in 1961. My daughter was born shortly after my mother's death in 1992, so we named her Jayne.

Except for his time in the Navy, my father spent his entire childhood and working adult life in Salem and Peabody. But he made up for it in his retirement years, traveling extensively in the U.S. in his "rig."

He met Claire 14 years ago, who became his partner and traveling companion. They went to all 50 states, dancing and singing along the way. They spent many happy winters in Myrtle Beach and summers in Maine. He sold his home in Maine and bought

a bigger one down the street on [Sebago Lake](#) four years ago (and, ever the optimist, he took out a 30-year mortgage). But because of all of his time sick at sea in the Navy, he never set foot on a boat in Maine!

He loved puttering around his house in Maine, constantly doing yard work. He spent the last weekend of his life spreading bags and bags of mulch around his flowers and trees, getting ready for our family reunion later this summer. (I talked with one of his Maine neighbors on Wednesday, who told me that when he tried to buy some mulch at the local discount store, the clerk said she was sorry but “some old guy keeps coming in and buying all we have.”)

Bernie loved being the center of attention. He loved golf, poker parties, acting, dancing, and singing. He would preside over family gatherings, making lobsters and his famous “chowder” (putting in just about everything (including, my son insists, burnt bagels from breakfast)). He loved to spoil his grandchildren with ice cream and treats.

He moved into the [Brooksby Village Retirement Community](#) two years ago (but kept his Salem and Maine houses as well). He thrived there, making many new friends (although he complained about all of the “old people” there). He had his [picture in the Boston Globe in a story about Brooksby](#).

He absolutely loved to perform in plays and to sing. He had a lead role in “Love Rides the Rails,” and was planning on being in another show this fall. Last year, he won the [Tanner City Idols singing competition](#) in the age 60+ category for his rendition of “Young at Heart.” He also performed with them in the “Salute to America” and “Duelling Duets.” He cut some CDs of his music which he would give to friends (As a joke, I put them on eBay – but there were no takers!) Our last memories of him are his singing enthusiastically at Molly’s high school graduation party two weekends ago.

As a child of the Depression, he was, how shall I put it, frugal (OK, cheap). He loved to buy dented cans of food and to shop at discount stores. He viewed any food left on a plate as a personal insult (and it went right into the chowder). Whoever got to Maine first would race to check the expiration date of food in the refrigerator. On one of his visits to Cincinnati, he bought a pair of yellow volleyball sneakers – not because he played volleyball or liked yellow, but because they were a “deal.” One of his proudest recent purchases was the tuxedo from Building 19 you saw him in today.

He prided himself on being self-sufficient and hated to hire others to do work for him. We knew that Claire was the woman for him when she helped him build a deck on his Salem house and put on a new roof on his Maine house. In fact, this year, at age 82, he had been threatening to put on a new roof on his Maine house. And he stained the exterior of the Maine house himself this spring.

Yet he was exceedingly generous with others. He helped Gayle and me pay for college and graduate and law school, and he helped us save for college for his grandchildren. He was also generous and trusting with others, and would share his money, his food, his car, and his home.

Bernie always focused on the future – what was coming next. When traveling, the point was to get there – preferably faster than the last time. At Yellowstone, he read the paper because, he said, “I saw the geysers last year.”

My father was not a reflective man, and like many men of his generation, did not often share his deepest thoughts with his family. But a man’s greatest legacy is not the words he spoke but the life he lead. Bernie’s life embodied three values that we can all benefit from: hard work, education, and loyalty.

Bernie did not wear his faith on his sleeve, but he was a lifetime Catholic who regularly attended church – in his later years, he attended church here (when he was in Salem), but also at Brooksby Village and in Maine. Like many sons, I rebelled against the faith of my father and only returned to church 11 years ago. When I visited my father over the past several years, I would go to Mass with him, and in many ways it felt like I was back in church with my father in the 1960s and 1970s.

Let me end with a story from the last weekend of my father’s life. Last Saturday, my daughter had a friend over our house, and for some reason I felt the need to show the tape we had made of her birth. (We had not watched the tape in many, many years.) We saw the joy of that day and the following days, when my father, father-in-law, and mother-in-law came to meet their granddaughter. I was struck by how much younger we all looked.

After going to bed on Saturday night, something happened that had never happened to me before. I was awakened with two words running through my brain – “It’s Time.” As I laid awake, I thought about my approaching 50th birthday later this month and the younger images of me, my father, and father-in-law on the tape. “It’s Time” – my son Reed had just turned 17, and I had the overwhelming sense that I needed to prepare him for manhood and to eventually take my place.

I thought about those two words – “It’s Time” – all day Sunday, and I was awakened again early Monday morning with the same thoughts. I resolved to talk with Reed later that day, but before I could, I got the call from my sister that my father had died sometime that weekend in Maine.

I am convinced that Bernie somehow sent me those words: “It’s Time.” I would challenge each of you – if there is something left unsaid between you and a parent, a child, a sibling, or a friend – Bernie would say to you “It’s Time.” It’s Time for you today to say those words to that parent, or that child, or that sibling, or that friend, because you’ll never know when that opportunity will be taken away from you.