

Eulogy

Good morning, and thank you – everyone – for gathering today to remember the life of Anna McCarthy, my mom. Some of you have come a long way to be here, which is a testament to how deeply she affected the lives of the people she encountered. For those of you from Suffield, I feel privileged to talk about my mom in front of all of you, the people who made up her community for the past 28 years.

I can't help but start at the end. Last year, on December 15th, my mom suffered a life-threatening event: a ruptured aortic aneurysm. Most people who have this happen at home don't even make it to the hospital, and those who do, often don't recover from the hours of surgery that usually follow. But my mom did.

Shortly after, one of the ICU nurses told me that my mom was literally the sickest person in Hartford Hospital. But just a few days later she was awake, alert and working hard to communicate. At that point the staff, and even the surgeons, began referring to her as "Our Christmas Miracle."

My mom spent five weeks in the ICU, hooked up to all sorts of tubes and machines – just to be able to keep breathing. But during that awful time, and in the many months that followed, I watched her persevere in her recovery, pushing through pain and exhaustion to first breathe, then speak, and then walk on her own. And through all that, she never wavered from her singular purpose: to get well enough to get back home, to her family, her friends, her students and colleagues – her full life.

One of the most important things in Anna's life in the last five years was her grandson, my son, Adrian. My mom—whose self-selected grandma name was “Aya”—had an uncanny talent for picking out unique toys that kids always loved. And because she was determined to pass on her fabulous sense of style, Adrian was always the best dressed kid in preschool.

Of course, her best gifts were the ones that didn't come with a deal on shipping. My mom loved spending time with Adrian. In fact, the day she fell ill, she had been planning to pick him up from kindergarten in Cambridge and take him back to Suffield for a weekend of puzzles, Legos, reading, and all-you-can-eat pancakes. When she couldn't be with him she looked after him from afar, checking in to make sure he was wearing a hat on a cold winter's day—like any good Russian babushka.

The bond my mom built with my son was so strong that it didn't fray even over the months she was recovering from the ruptured aneurysm. They seemed perfectly at ease with each other on those afternoons Adrian spent in her room at The Suffield House nursing home, coloring and making her beaded bracelets that spelled out “I Heart Aya”. I will always treasure the look on my mom's face that warm spring day when she was able to walk outside so that Adrian could show his Aya how he had learned to ride his bike without training wheels.

Long before she became grandma Aya, my mom was Anna Borisovna Miroshnichenko. Ania was a loyal friend, and kept up with a half dozen of her high school classmates long after all of them had left Leningrad, Russia and scattered around the globe, to places like Alaska, Canada, and Norway.

When she was with her friends, Ania sometimes revealed a mischievous streak. She once told me, with a sparkle in her eye, how she and her friends walked into their high school one morning, past the usual line of teachers greeting students, and hung up their coats, then decided that they weren't really interested in going to their first period class, so they grabbed their coats again, marched right past all those teachers, and walked out of the school. Now before the students here get any ideas, remember that this was a different time and place... that class was most likely "Soviet History," which was more propaganda than scholarship. And in any case, whether this was political protest or teenage solidarity, she would have served the Soviet equivalent of detention proudly alongside her friends.

So how did Ania go from being a student in Russia to a Spanish teacher in a private high school in Connecticut? The path was anything but direct.

Setting aside the occasional exploit, Ania was a stellar student of language and literature. She excelled in English and Spanish, and received her bachelors' and masters' degrees in English and American Literature from Leningrad State University, while also being involved with tour-guiding on the side.

This allowed Ania to hang out with an international crowd, where she met a handsome young Cuban student, Cosme Damian, who made a lasting impression. A few years later, after they were married and after I was born and saying my first words in Russian, we moved to Cuba to live with my father's extended family on the Isle of Pines. There, Ania taught English in a local boarding school and oversaw a postgraduate program for high school teachers of Russian.

I still marvel at her courage, at the age of 26, in moving to a country she had never been to before to start a completely new life. Some complicated circumstances led my mom and me to go back to Russia a few years later. Remaking herself for a second time, Ania completed postgraduate studies in tourism and interpreting, then taught English to children and adults and worked as an interpreter and translator.

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In those days, hanging out with foreigners could draw unwanted attention from the authorities, but my mom, as always, made exceptions for her friends, so we sometimes had American tourists over to our tiny apartment, where she made them pizza and shared stories late into the night. It was one of these American friends who gave us the opportunity to come to the U.S. in June of 1989. And so, when she was still only 32 years old, Ania remade her life for a third time.

Just two years later, Russian Communism fell and the place where my mom had spent most of her life changed forever. But by then, Ania, now Mrs. McCarthy, had begun teaching here at Suffield Academy, and this school and this community remained a constant for the rest of her life.

Isn't that a remarkable story? It happens to be true.

Now, I've also heard that over the years there has been speculation among students about whether Mrs. McCarthy was secretly a KGB agent. She herself never admitted or denied these rumors, and I suppose that would explain how she knew so much about shooting a gun that she coached her riflery team to victory year after year. But then again, while Mrs. McCarthy had perfect grammar in English, unlike in that TV show, *The Americans*, her accent didn't exactly blend in. In any case, when it came to Spanish, she had textbook Castillian, while on the phone with the Cubans she would drop her "s"s with abandon.

Of course, long before she was a student of language or a world traveler, a mischievous friend or a proud grandma, my mom was the daughter of my grandfather, Boris Yakovlevich Miroshnichenko.

In many ways they were opposites: my grandfather was a talented painter and an avid athlete, while my mom preferred to look at art in museums and watch sports on TV; he had a scientist's mind and an engineer's training, while she claimed to be bad at math.

But my grandfather and my mom shared these defining traits: a fierce intellect, a passion for teaching, and perseverance. Boris had survived the deprivations of Russia during the Second World War to become a university professor, and by example he taught her the will to overcome hardship, and sharpened her skills in argument. Many of you will know from experience that regardless of the topic, Mrs. McCarthy was a formidable debating opponent because she articulated her views carefully and backed up her positions with an arsenal of evidence. Whenever my grandfather or I took her on, we usually ended up declaring defeat, or at least a truce, in the face of her unshakable reasoning.

For all that, Ania and Boris were always very close, all the more so after they lost Ania's mother, Boris' wife, when my mom was a teenager. The two of them lived together almost all her life, and even as Boris became increasingly frail, my mom cared for him at her home by herself. She did so until he passed away last August at the age of 96, an exceptional sacrifice born of love and dedication to family, an unspoken lesson she taught me, and that I applied in the days, weeks and months after she fell ill.

It's only the end of September now, but my thoughts are already turning toward my first November without my mom and grandfather. It's long been a special time for our family, not just because of Thanksgiving, but because November 23rd happens to be both my mom's and her father's birthday; my son's birthday now falling on the 22nd is an extra treat.

For as long as I can remember, we have celebrated at my mom's house with our own ritual: Each year on Thanksgiving afternoon my mom and I would banish the rest of the family from the kitchen while we spent several hours creating an internationally inspired pescatarian feast. My mom would prepare the Russian Salat Olivier and mashed potatoes, and set out the black bread and caviar. I would throw together a green salad, roast some acorn squash, and make stuffing. For our main dish we always made... salmon marinated in Cuban Mojo Criollo.

Eventually our small group—my mom, my grandfather, my husband Jesse, and later Adrian—would gather at the dining room table, heaping with more food than we could possibly finish. Then we would make a few toasts, and dig in. Before long, someone would bring up some scandal recently in the news or an interesting article about post-secondary education, and the debate would be on. The meal always ended with the presentation of the shared birthday cake, countless candles blazing, accompanied by a rousing rendition of the Russian birthday song.

But it's the time before the singing and debating and eating that I'm remembering now, the time when my mom and I would be alone in the kitchen, chopping vegetables and sipping our rum & cokes, airing a few gripes about school or work, or laughing over a funny story told by one of her Russian classmates who had just called to wish her a happy birthday. The cooking time was our time, just for my mom and me, and I will miss that dearly.

And so I come back again to the end.

My mom dealt with many challenges in her life, and she met all of them with clarity of purpose and an unwavering determination to succeed. Her last challenge—her ruptured aortic aneurysm—was no exception. She pushed through the indignities of her condition, striving to get back to her home... and to all of you.

During the months she fought to get better she was buoyed by the outpouring of love she received from friends far and near — the students who sent hand-written cards in Spanish sharing their progress in class; the colleagues who filled up her bird feeder or brought her dog Bowie for a visit; the friend who texted a thrilling play-by-play of a Serena Williams grand slam match; the ladies who sent daily text messages with inspirational phrases; and the students who gave her artwork that filled up her walls.

She had made a difference in all of these lives, and many more. And when she faced her biggest challenge, they—you—were all there for her.

From the bottom of my heart, I thank all of you for that.