

Karen Zelfman Bell

Remarks of friend and colleague Jane Gould at Karen's Funeral, 12-17-10

"You don't get to choose how you're going to die, or when. You can only decide how you're going to live now." - These are the words of Joan Baez.

"I don't want to get to the end of my life and find that I have just lived the length of it. I want to have lived the width of it as well."-These are the words of the writer, Diane Ackerman.

I might have had a debate with Karen about which words I should use for this purpose. After all, she was a Joan Baez fan.

But both quotes depict the deeds and philosophy that characterized the life and times of my beloved friend and colleague of 37 years, Karen Zelfman Bell, sometimes also known as Karen Z. Bell, and always known affectionately in office parlance as KZB.

Our friendship was an unusual one in that it was both intensely personal and professional. Our friendship was an unusual one also because there were times in our lives - years in fact - when we saw one another every single day. We began our legal careers in offices next to one another and prior to recently moving her office to her home in Larchmont, Karen spent her last 4 office years in an office adjoining mine.

Karen and I met in the Fall of 1973 in our first legal jobs as Assistant District Attorneys in the Appeals Bureau in the Bronx County, where we were referred by our male colleagues as "Lawyerettes." Today people are sued for less. But in fact at the time it was a term of endearment. Some of the people who used that term are here to honor and remember Karen today.

We became fast friends. That friendship immediately expanded to include Sandy and my husband Ken. In this friendship we shared literally every important life experience and plenty of the less important ones as well. We shared the experiences of being young New York lawyers and young wives. We moved to Westchester at the same time and at roughly the same times shared the experience of becoming mothers.

We even attempted to do something which was considered radical at the time - share a job. But in those days "flex-time" was not part of any lexicon and the employer in question could not seem to understand that it was getting two for the price of less than



one and that never happened.

My family was welcomed into the greater Zelfman clan which included Karen's wonderful mother, Esther Zelfman and her sisters and brothers-in-law. We shared vacations together when our children were young. We have shared the happy times, planning and participating in the b'nai mitzvah of Catherine, Jonathan and our children, showers, weddings, important birthdays - it turns out every birthday is important. We shared the particularly wonderful memories of celebrating the 100th birthday of Karen's mother, Esther Zelfman, and of celebrating Karen's 60th birthday, when in true KZB form, rather than allowing her family and friends to throw a party for her, she threw a party for her women relatives and friends.

But the experience we were most looking forward to sharing was that of being grandparents together. That of course was not to be and I think Karen sensed that. But it did not stop her from enjoying the anticipation of the birth of Jonathan and Julie's baby, attending the ultrasound exam, and talking about appointments for layette and ordering baby furniture.

One of the decisions that we made together in late 1976 or early 1977 - in the years b.c. or "before Catherine," was to attend a meeting of what was then a fledgling organization, known as the Westchester Women's Bar Association. At that time the President was Sondra Miller and the organization had perhaps 30 members. Justice Miller is with us here today.

As the years went on, the organization grew and so did Karen's involvement. She established her practice here in Westchester, first in Larchmont and then in White Plains. We attended so-called networking lunches. Those lunches entailed bringing a brown bag to a crummy conference room first at Legal Services and then later to Macy's in White Plains. She chaired many Women's Bar Association Committees.

As you know, she went on to serve with distinction as the tenth President of the Westchester Women's Bar Association. Many of her fellow Presidents and other fellow officers and co-chairs are here today to honor her.

In that role and in every other professional and volunteer role that she fulfilled, Karen can only be described as a "friend magnet." She subscribed to the motto "Make new friends, but keep the old." To her, they were all gold.

Karen was the recipient of the Marilyn Menge Distinguished Service Award of the Women's Bar Association of the State of New York. She was a mentor and example for female attorneys of every age, including women her own age who came to the practice of law later in life.

Karen developed a reputation as a real estate attorney par excellence. She was the "go-to" lawyer for a number of local real estate brokers. Her clients loved her.

Karen knew she was very fortunate in her adult life. She had a wonderful husband Sandy and two terrific children, Catherine and Jonathan, later joined of course by Julie and Maddy, and they enjoyed a rich family life.

But she had a profound understanding that others were not so fortunate. In the other aspect of her practice, matrimonial law, she saw the suffering of children in the midst of divorce. She thus went on to serve for more than two decades as a law guardian appointed by the Court to protect the interests of those children. She was devoted to those children and they were so lucky to have her as their advocate.

As her practice evolved, she became acutely aware that litigants in matrimonial actions, particularly women, were at a substantial disadvantage because they frequently did not always have the means to secure the counsel they sorely needed. So Karen and other colleagues were instrumental in forming the Moderate Means Panel at the Pace Women's Justice Center through which attorneys reduced their rates in order to represent such women. Karen was the first recipient of the Moderate Means Award which was initially presented to the program by the New York State Bar Association and now is presented under the auspices of the Westchester Women's Bar Association. In my conversation with her this week, the director of the program applauded Karen as an advisor mentor and educator.

Karen also began to recognize as did her colleagues in matrimonial practice that there might be a better more humane and cost effective way of divorcing than expensive litigation - thus her enthusiastic support of collaborative divorce. Her fellow practitioners have said that "Karen's skill and commitment have been an inspiration to her colleagues in collaborative divorce" and that "her qualities of empathy, sensitivity, advocacy and knowledge have made Karen invaluable to her clients and to the collaborative process as a whole." Several of her grateful clients are here today.

Karen until served for years as a Director of the Westchester Women's Bar Association Foundation, where her wise and thoughtful input into the grant and scholarship awarding process was invaluable. Lest you think that her service was limited to the Westchester Women's Bar Association, because of her standing in the profession at large, she was appointed to the Committee on Character and Fitness for the 9th Judicial District. In that role, true to form, Karen absolutely loved meeting the soon to be newest crop of our profession.

As a result of all of these involvements and not least of all because of the force of her personality - and it was pretty forceful - Karen's circle of friends just kept widening. In my own case and I have been told in many of yours, Karen's friends' friends frequently became her friends and lasting ones at that. Look around you today.

Karen and Sandy have always been interested in - pretty much everything - travel,

reading, theater, opera, hiking, gardening and spending time at their beautiful home in Milan. There were always plans and Karen was the one to make them.

But if Karen was vibrant and energized before, if she embraced life before, if she wanted to have every experience she could before, then this embrace, this vibrancy, was intensified and magnified in these last almost four years since she was diagnosed with this awful disease.

Following her first round of chemo, the first thing Karen did was to insist that she have the quarterly meeting of the Foundation Board at her home. She insisted on cooking everything herself. She set the table with her favorite china purchased with love in Italy. It was a dinner and a table fit for royalty - her friends. As she said that dinner was important to her.

She and Sandy took trips to Costa Rica, Panama, Sicily, London and most recently Asheville, North Carolina . They took family vacations in Wellfleet. Karen was always making plans. Theater, Opera. Company in Milan.

As we watched her, Karen taught me and many others - a lesson - make time. Make time for the things and people that are important.

When she finished that first round of chemo some of her lady lawyer friends wanted to take her to lunch. That lunch evolved into LWL Ladies (or Lawyers) who Lunch, a group who met for lunch every few months to catch up on their lives, talk a little law and foster friendship. Karen became the hub and driving force of that group. If a luncheon had not been set, she picked up the phone to make sure it was. This past June, it was she who co-hosted the group. Most of us thought we never had time to go out to lunch. But at her insistence we made the time.

Our most recent scheduled lunch was adjourned, *sine die*, because Karen was not feeling up to it and somehow, no one felt like having that lunch without her.

And now on a personal level, as awful as these last four years have been for Karen and her family and her friends, I have come to conclude that in some ways, at least for me they were a gift.

No one among us would look forward to spending the day - or as it turned out - many days - with a dear friend as she was having chemotherapy at Sloane Kettering. But for me, the gift was that Karen allowed me to do that. She allowed me to be a friend, the friend I wanted to be. She enabled me to make time, to put everything else aside, to be present not just physically, but emotionally. She gave me the gift of allowing me in, whether it was getting a glass of water, getting lunch, listening to what the doctor had to say or just sitting quietly while she rested.

She had the grace to permit so many others, including her lady lawyer friends to express their concern and caring, to visit even when it was difficult for her.

Only a month ago, she agreed that some of her close friends would come to the house in Larchmont to have lunch with her and visit. I sent out an email to about 10 women on two days notice. Everyone came - from court- notwithstanding or any other appointment. Everyone wanted to be there. They followed up with calls, dropping food and in the last week not knowing what to do and wanting to be present with her, at Catherine's suggestion, wrote notes - which for many were their goodbyes. Catherine read them to her and in the process, I think learned how others saw her mother. Sandy told me the notes told the story. I have no doubt that that was true.

Karen gave her friends another gift. And it was to see the way in which her family loved and cared for her in these last years, but most of all in these last months and weeks. Watching you, Catherine, Jonathan, Julie and Maddy and being with you was as close as I have ever come to feeling that I was in the presence of the divine. You give true meaning to the words "Honor your mother and father."

And to Sandy, her San, her Dandy, her Dan there are no words to describe the love, the care, compassion, and concern you have shown in your every action with Karen and for her over these last four years. No one who has been with you will ever forget it.

There is a phrase in a Psalm 90 "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

That phrase does not mean that we should count the days, but rather that we should have the wisdom to make the days count.

Karen had the wisdom to make every single day count.

That is her precious and radiant legacy to each of us.