

Joan Gibbons Wilson
Outline of Eulogy by James R. Wilson, son
January 13, 2006

- 1) Thank you, John, Bill, Carol and Dee. Thank you Bob and Tom. I am Jim, Joan's son.
- 2) I am going to talk a little about where Joan came from, where she went, Joan as a mother and Joan as a friend.
 - a) Joan was born and raised in Chatham, New Jersey.
 - b) Her father was Harold Ralston Gibbons – Ral.
 - i) Ral came from a modest background; his father Sam was a plumber and roofer.
 - ii) Ral worked hard, graduated from Stevens Institute of Technology in 1913. From there, he followed in Alfred Sloan's footsteps to become Chief Engineer of General Motor's Hyatt Roller Bearing.
 - iii) Ral was Chatham's School Board President, a staunch conservative with a strong work ethic.
 - iv) He was demanding of his daughters, Lois and Joan. You must always serve, Ral frequently intoned.
 - c) Joan's mother was Dorothy Binns – Dot.
 - i) She was descendent of poor Scottish and Irish Canadians.
 - ii) Dot was a World War I nurse, serving at Camp Coetquidan in Brittany, France.
 - iii) After the war, Dot married Ral, his second wife, and cared for Ral's grievously ill son, Junior, who soon passed away.
 - iv) Joan often told me how compassionate Dot was, providing food to families at her back door during the Great Depression.
- 3) Wonder of Life
 - a) Home in Chatham
 - i) Joan was always very proud of her parents and her family; their solid nature and dutiful charity. In her last months, Mom would often look up from her sad fog, from her indignity, and tell me to remember that she came from a good family; that her roots were sound.
 - b) George and Joan
 - i) From her staid upbringing Joan found something refreshing, something entirely different – SAE fraternity President, WWII Navy fly-boy, aspiring "boy reporter" George Wilson.
 - ii) A guy who had a passion for art and adventure and for changing the world, righting what is wrong. A guy whose family was, to be frank, nonlinear. George's maternal grandfather crossed the ocean 39 times, walked from Capetown to Cairo, walked across Russia, and stepped into the jaws of many adventures. On his father's side, Dad is descendent from a gallivanting Senator and Supreme Court Justice [James Wilson] who fled Pennsylvania to avoid being thrown into debtors' prison.
 - iii) Joan loved George and was a great admirer of his work and passions, his many excitements.
 - iv) This new life she chose also proved a stress that Mom conscientiously and privately worked to balance.
- 4) Mom deepest and greatest passions were her children.
 - a) Mom enabled and did so much with my sister Kathy and I: Den Leader. Baseball partner. Skiing at Sugarbush and Sugarloaf. Taking Kathy to horse shows. Cheering us on at swim

meets. Backpacking in Yellowstone. Tobogganing down Washington's Big Hill. Swimming in the streams of Great Falls Park. Catching an enormous, 42-pound striped bass in the surf at Block Island. Sailing across the Severn River. Running the school fair. Playing drums with her grandchildren.

- b) This woman was vivid, fully and richly engaged in life, in her kids and what was going on in her community. She put her arms around an immense chunk of humanity.
 - c) Amidst all this action, Mom was always there, sympathetic and supportive – sharing and helping children negotiate numerous uncertainties. She was always non-judgmental and unconditional in her love.
 - d) She was also very courageous. It wasn't easy being George's wife; he would often go off to the wars and conflicts of our time. Once he left on an aircraft carrier for seven months, having just bought a new house that Joan never saw. Mom dutifully packed and moved across the river.
 - e) I remember in 1968, George was in Vietnam, the Tet Offensive came, Viet Cong infiltrated Saigon. Dad was often at the front lines. Joan lost 20 pounds from her already slim frame. It was a scary time. Joan wanted to make sure Kathy and I had good experience when Dad was away. I remember her crying as she worked to light the hibachi by herself at a Memorial Day cookout. Some guy made fun of her, with her two little kids and smoky fire; but Joan bit her lip and soldiered on.
 - f) Mom was an inspiration when I was recovering from a near fatal car accident, brain surgery, coma and paralysis. Again, she was the compassionate partner and confidant in a near impossible mission. Not just in the ICU, but the many months – if not years – of delicate, stressful and compassionate care for a grievously injured son who had to re-build his world from the wheelchair on out. Joan would patiently hold my belt loop as I struggled to walk, and she endured my black depression and tantrums. George credits Joan with saving my life: He says I was “born a second time” thanks to Mom.
- 5) Amidst our many rushes of excitement and challenge, Mom also gave much to keep the family on course: Joan helped with homework; kept the house immaculate; balanced the checkbook; made our lunches; threw parties. She was extraordinary.
- a) How fitting, then, in our last years together, we had the opportunity to give so much to Joan. She had horrible afflictions – horrible afflictions: Lou Gehrig's disease, spinal stenosis, diffuse arthritis, and dementia.
 - b) George was a valiant and loving partner, always there for Joan in her time of need.
 - i) Dad searched the world for best doctors – from Johns Hopkins and NIH to Mayo Clinic.
 - ii) He was Joan's constant and unflinching caregiver.
 - c) In her last year, I was with Mom almost daily, and Kathy shuttled many times back and forth from her farm in southwest Virginia.
 - d) At the end, we had five days and nights – mostly without sleep – by Mom's side at the Hospice.
- 6) Mom was always there for us. With her, I knew I would never walk alone. And it was not just for me. It was all of us for whom Mom lived, her friends, her family, her students and the less fortunate for whom she volunteered. She made this a better world.
- 7) I thank you and urge you to carry on Joan Wilson's wonderful spirit and to know that, in a way, she is with you.

God Bless.