

Life

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whole world,” said Marialice Olivo, the oldest. “She is gracious, she is loving, she is smart.”

“I had a T-shirt that said, ‘Have no fear, Mom’s here,’ and I still believe it,” said William, No. 7, toasting his mom, “You’re a saint, no matter what.”

“You loved me whether I was good or bad,” added Christine Wade, No. 6.

“She was mostly bad!” chimed in Barbara Cagle, No. 13, and everyone laughed.

Jokes and one-liners crackled around the room, as the kids laughingly competed for their mom’s attention.

“We love each other like crazy,” Barbara said. “Growing up, we all wanted to impress Mom.”

To the good-natured jeers of her siblings, Jerilyn Doten, No. 9, read a poem to her rhyme-loving mother with the repeating phrase, “My mother liked me best,” at the end of each quatrain, but ending with an admission at the end, “She had to each of us identically confessed!”

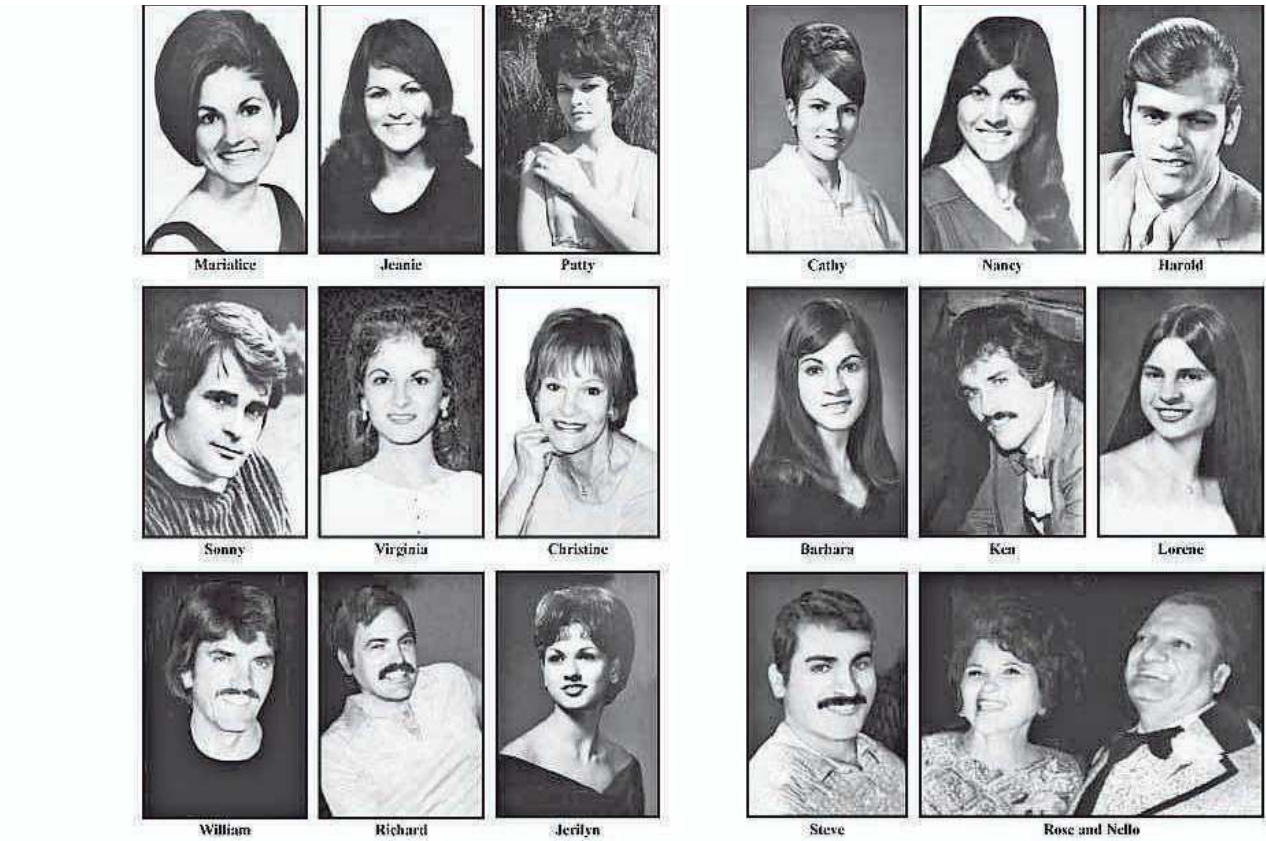
By all accounts, Rose Olivo never set out to break any records or turn any heads. She was simply a dedicated Catholic mom with a kind of love for children and resilience that allowed her to survive and thrive as the matriarch of her family.

“She is a very calm person,” Barbara said. “She will enter this calm spirit from reading, and (by) also reading the Bible. In that calmness, she’s able to think things through and make the right decision. She has always been this way.”

Rose was born to Joseph and Lydia Nunez in 1918, in a small mining town in Arizona. Her father was a miner and assayer who spent many years working at Penn Copper Mine in Campo Seco, Calif. Originally from Spain, Joseph gained his U.S. citizenship later, in 1933.

Following her mother’s death, when Rose was 4, she was separated from her older brother and younger sister and raised by a foster mother. Stories from this difficult time in her life are few, as she’s a master of “living in the moment” and “moving on,” said Barbara, who published a book about her mother’s life in 2008.

It was through Rose’s older brother, raised nearby by another family in San Jose, that she met Nello Olivo, a young man of Italian heritage. She was a good student with a keen memory and a love



Rose and Nello Olivo had 16 children. Rose turned 100 this year. PHOTO COURTESY OF BARBARA CAGLE

for reading. He was a few years older, a student at a vocational school, and skilled at playing the accordion.

The couple eloped in 1935; he was 23, she was 17 and already graduated from high school. At first, they lived with family members and sold enchiladas on the side to make ends meet. Their first child, Marialice, was born in 1937, and their second, Jeanie, came along soon after they bought their first house, a small five-bedroom home with an over-size lot, for \$2,500.

Nello worked as a plumber and did other repair jobs to fund his growing family. As more babies arrived, he made a habit of dropping by restaurants on his way home from work, to see if there were any leftovers. The couple gardened and harvested fruit off their property’s trees.

“They prayed a lot. I remember they prayed over bills,” Barbara said.

Rose often turned to her church leadership for advice, and it was a priest’s promise that all her children could attend school at St. Joseph Academy for just \$10 per month that allowed her family to get the parochial education she so desired. Barbara remembers her mother paying off the kids’ education at St. Joseph and Notre Dame High School many

years after they’d graduated.

Rose’s time was limited, but she did eventually head up the school’s parent club – called the Mothers Guild – and regularly helped with projects and homework. At home, apparently one infraction she wouldn’t overlook, no matter what, was cussing. Typically the offender was sentenced to eating a teaspoon of pepper.

“I don’t believe it accomplishes anything by swearing except to lower yourself,” she once wrote.

A lifelong lover of the written word, she liked to write letters to her children as they passed through the stages of life and left home to travel, join the military or get married.

Five of the Olivo boys followed Nello into his plumbing business. Started in 1970 as Alco Plumbing, their father’s company grew, with their help, to become Novotec, Inc., a successful plumbing and process piping company with four locations in the Bay Area.

Now Nello Jr., or “Sonny,” is president and general manager of the company, as well as a winery owner.

Back in the day, “Mom was Dad’s bookkeeper,” Barbara said. “She could remember 10 phone numbers and messages to give to Dad while holding a ba-

by in her arms. She didn’t have any time to write down the message or numbers, so she would simply remember them.”

Nello died in 2003, at age 87, just a few months after his and Rose’s youngest child, Steve, died of cancer. The remaining 15 children – all senior citizens now – remain.

Many have been able to attend family reunions that started back in 1987.

Jeanie Olivo, No. 2, a trained CPA, has been her mom’s companion and traveling partner for many years now. Nearly four years ago, mom moved from San Jose to Oregon, also home to Rose’s daughter Virginia Teeney, No. 5.

Rose has certainly slowed down in the last few years, but her answering machine at home belies this, stating she’s out “having a good time” if she’s not answering the phone. She still likes to read, play computer games, and do crossword puzzles.

Apparently, she’s a force to be reckoned with on the Scrabble board.

“Today is my 100th birthday,” she said at her party, dark eyes sparkling impishly against her impossibly smooth skin. “But this is also my 100th birth year, and I plan on celebrating any day I feel like it all year long.”

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