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OPINION | MAIN STREET

Mrs. Alvey's Opus

A piano teacher who taught my girls that excellence is within their grasp.



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Over a lifetime a man will have special relationships with a variety of women: his mother, his bride, his daughters.

And his daughters' piano teacher.

Ours was Mrs. Alvey. Right up to her death last month at the age of 92, children still came each week to her Madison, N.J., home for their lessons. All three of my girls learned to play in her living room, and two of them were still taking lessons from her up to the day she entered the hospital.

What does that mean to a man? Let me paint a picture of a frosty morning last December, when our family was rushing to get ready in time for Mrs. Alvey's annual Christmas recital. As I shaved, the joyous strains of a daughter playing "Adeste Fideles" suddenly broke through the chaos.

It was a Capt. von Trapp moment. From that scene in “The Sound of Music” (if you are father to three girls, you become very familiar with the von Trapps) where Christopher Plummer’s anger is interrupted by the singing of his children. “You brought music back into the house,” a chastened captain tells Fraulein Maria. I had the same thought as I rinsed my razor, though my Maria was not Julie Andrews but Mary Alvey.

This was her calling. Taking a child from her first clumsy pounding of the keys to, well, anywhere from Mozart to Taylor Swift. And she did it throughout all the upheavals of American life—13 presidents, five wars, a depression, a recession and even a moon landing.

We started with Mrs. Alvey for convenience: She lived a block away. But we stayed for the excellence.

The home Christmas concert was the culmination of her year, when each child would get up before a room crammed with parents and grandparents, announce the carol to be played and then offer a brief summary of its history. Followed by coffee, cookies and eggnog.

It’s no small thing. In our public domains we obsess over the Big Happenings: what Putin is doing in Syria, whether ObamaCare can be repealed, if Donald Trump will win, and so on.

In the meantime, our lived lives are dominated by neighbors, coaches, teachers, crossing guards, cops, local shopkeepers, library volunteers and so on. These men and women seldom make the headlines, but they command the little platoons that make us human. Even in places with no shortage of money, perhaps especially in such places, it is our Mrs. Alveys who civilize society and turn our towns into communities.

This was her labor of love. For Mrs. Alvey, this meant tough love. Futile to try to explain to her, when the children grew older, about sports and other activities now vying for time and attention with piano.

Then again, how wondrous it is to watch your children introduced to excellence by someone who lets them know it’s within their grasp if only they are willing to work at it.

Naturally in this world there were consequences for showing up unprepared. Not just for the children, either. Once, while Mrs. Alvey was reprimanding a daughter for some dereliction, I was sitting in the back of her living room busying myself on my iPhone.

Without warning, she turned both her attention and her cane in my direction: “And may I ask what Dad is doing to make sure his daughter puts in the practice she needs?” After that, this father prudently opted to wait in the car for the conclusion of piano lessons.

At her funeral at the Methodist Church that abuts Drew University—Mrs. Alvey's alma mater—her husband, George, took his place beside her casket. Before this same altar, on almost this same spot, the two had stood 65 years earlier when they vowed to remain together 'til death they did part. There's a lesson here too.

In the 40 hours after doctors told Mrs. Alvey there was no longer anything they could do for her, she issued her demands—she wanted her family around her, she wanted to see her women's chorus, and she wanted a mint chocolate chip shake. On her deathbed there was no rage at the dying of the light; this was a good woman who was going home.

"I never knew death could be so magical," her son David said at her funeral. When she died, her obituary noted that Mary R. Alvey had never lived anywhere but Madison.

But what an impact this one life had. Of the generations of boys and girls she taught, most are now adults with families and homes of their own, some with grandchildren. And because this dedicated woman thought enough to demand the best of her charges, these homes too are filled with pianos and music.

So Merry Christmas, Mrs. Alvey. And thank you.

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