



Ellen Nevaranta

July 3, 1918 - June 2, 2010

Ellen Nevaranta, (nee Elle Johanna Kesti), of Florence, passed away on June 2, 2010.

"Josie," as she was known by her family, was born on July 3, 1918, in Caspian, to Finnish immigrants, Edvard and Maria Eliina Kesti (nee Hautamaki). Like so many adventurers and romantics before them; they came with one small trunk of their belongings. But there would

never be a trunk large enough, to contain all the hopes and dreams they carried, in search for a better and happier life. To care for his wife and four young children, Ed Kesti worked as a miner in the Caspian Mine. By all recollections passed down to Josie, Eliina was an amazing

cook and wonderful mother. At just five years old, Josie's happy childhood shattered, when her mother, Eliina, died at age 29. Josie spoke often of that event and the impact it had on her father.

She remembered when the mourners came to their home and viewed Eliina in her casket, even the tough Finnish miners were all brought to tears. Young Josie, who only spoke Finnish, pleaded with her mother, "Heraa Aiti...heraa aiti...Miksi et voi herata?" When translated means, "Wake up Mommy...Wake up...Why don't you wake up?" After realizing her mother would not awaken,

Josie promised herself over and over, "I am not going to cry." She kept that promise, and held back many tears throughout her life. There was very little time for the motherless family to grieve together. In the days when 'men were cheaper than timbers,' Ed knew that meant miners, and he was left with the harsh reality of getting back to work and finding relatives that could take his children in. The eldest Reino, Josie, and Elsi Gialloreto (nee Kesti), her younger sister by one year, were all sent to relatives in Rock. Edwin, the baby of the family, was given up through an adoption. Josie reflected on saying goodbye to her baby brother by kissing him one last time on his cheek. Years later, when Edwin became a man, he was reunited with his father and siblings. It was all the more bittersweet knowing he'd been raised by the loving Koons family, just 14 miles away.

Josie and Elsi were next taken in by her Uncle Eero and Aunt Annie Kesti of Kingsford. There the two sisters helped care for younger cousin, Ethel, who still remembers little Josie pushing her while in the carriage. Under Annie's direction, Josie learned the art of pie making, and later became the master. The sisters eventually lived with their father, when he married, Tyyne Kujanpaa; and another sister, Taimi Mattson (nee Kesti), was born.

Heartbreak, hardships, hard times and hard work were the milestones of Josie's life. She endured all 91 of them with stoicism, willfulness, humor and quiet strength. She was nostalgic, wistful, sentimental and sweet; through letter writing, and storytelling she forever kept the past alive. She spoke so often, of so many things; the "old days," the "old-timers," the "one-room schoolhouse," and growing up poor. She spoke of the harsh Northern winters, the bitter cold, and trudging through waist high snow to get to school. Even so, she spoke of loving school, being a good speller, and she recalled to mind, many times, the first day of school. When Josie introduced herself in broken English, the teacher said, "You'll be Ellen now, Elle isn't an English name." The Kesti girls were teased at school; through their flour sack dresses, the

words, 'King Midas,' could faintly be read. She spoke of only having a 5th grade education, as she was needed to quit school and work on the farm. She regretted throughout her life not being able to earn a high school diploma. The only time Josie ever bragged was when she showed the picture of Eliina and her last report card from school; she had been a straight A student. She spoke of the many young friends she and Elsi lost to TB, or others being sent off to the "san." She spoke of the everyday tragedies that came along with farming, mining and logging in "those days."

She and Elsi maintained a special and unique bond throughout their lives, having survived so much suffering together. They kept close through letters, phone calls, vacations, visits and always reminded each other of the "hard times," and there was no other love like that of a sister.

Every time they were together, they laughed until tears rolled down their cheeks.

Josie was humble, thoughtful, and generous to the point of being selfless. She was compassionate and disliked anyone being picked on, especially any one of her grandchildren. She endured so many injustices throughout her life that she became a person of goodness and sincerity. She loved the simple life of being on a farm, but she would often say, "Work, work, work...farming is hard work." Still, she was adventurous, spontaneous and always full of youthful energy. She was the first of her friends to leave Finntown for Chicago. Her motherly qualities were soon noticed when she was hired to cook, clean and care for two small children in the affluent North Shore. Josie also recollected passing out banners and buttons for the husband and wife, who were running a large political campaign for FDR. She promptly earned attention for being hardworking, capable and trustworthy and soon neighbors were asking for 'more girls like her.' Josie found good jobs for her sister Elsi and other girl

friends from Finntown. With her first paycheck, she bought silk stockings and a new dress. Soon, Josie, Elsi and the Finntown girls were spending their free hours together, watching movies in the Wilmette Theatre, and dancing at the Aragon ballroom. She loved to polka and hear accordion music. She loved wildflowers and every so often she would wander off in the woods alone or take a walk through the fields to pick them and she'd set a bouquet of them on the kitchen table, for when company came. They were always the daintiest and most delicate flowers. She would

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hold one up close to you and say, "Isn't that the most beautiful flower you've ever seen...it's just beautiful!" She loved being a hostess, and the tradition of Saturday night sauna are memories still etched in our minds. Then, every Sunday afternoon, for years and years, Josie made a big meal for the family. Afterwards, when the dishes were dried and put away, she'd sit at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, and tell stories of the past. If it were a beautiful Summer or Autumn afternoon, she'd want to take a drive to Caspian, and visit her parents' grave. Josie loved to work with her hands, but they weren't those of an accomplished cello player; they were calloused, arthritic and bent. They were made famous from years of practice by kneading bread dough, rolling pie crust, peeling potatoes, slicing apples, pitching hay, milking cows, feeding chickens, chopping wood, shoveling snow, scrubbing floors, hanging clothes on the line, driving tractor, carrying buckets of water from the pump house and putting her hair in rollers. Josie loved to cook, and in her kitchen, many arguments were also prepared and stirred up along with her recipes. Who would get the end crust of warm bread from the oven, the biggest helping of mashed potatoes, the last piece of apple pie, the largest bowl of chocolate pudding, who had more dumplings in their beef stew and which one would be allowed to lick the cake batter spoon?

Josie was fun, had a mischievous side and was known to pull a prank or two. When stopped for speeding, she told her two young grandchildren, who were hitting one another in the backseat, they were going to jail and that's why the policeman was pulling her over. Within seconds, the fighting siblings, were

now holding onto each other for dear life! "Gone With the Wind" was the first movie she saw in a theatre and remained her favorite, along with "Shenandoah." She also loved watching 'Cowboy and Indian' movies, and on one occasion, her husband, Nilo, felt the need to rescue her from her own screams, by shutting off the television. Through time and years, Josie's picture of Eliina yellowed and faded, but in it Eliina never aged. To Josie, Eliina would forever be a young mother of her late 20s. With so many seasons that came and went, Josie's love and memory of Eliina never darkened or grew old; just Josie herself became a much, much older woman, than Eliina, ever lived to be. Older Josie would often say,

"Now I am an old-timer, but I don't feel old." "Who is that old lady in the mirror, I don't recognize her?" Then she would stretch back in her recliner, and her feet would lift towards the air, as she laughed aloud.

By this time, most of the native finntowners were gone, all but a few friends had died, and Elsi was the last of her siblings to pass away. Even the landscape around Josie changed. Many deeply rooted trees were lost to storms, sturdy barns once built by the new arrival of Finlanders were too becoming old and crumbling down. Rusting tractors sat idle in overgrown fields, hay rakes now had small trees growing from them, quaint farmhouses were tom down and replaced with a 3-car-garage. Cows and barn animals were sold off to pay debts. Barn boots were traded in for flip-flops. Windmills became mere windchimes, and long walks in the woods surrendered to 4-wheelers. Josie couldn't keep up with the times, and we are all reminded, of the small plaque, that hung in her kitchen for years; "The hurrier I go, the behinder I get."

Josie never attended a fine culinary school, she never earned a degree, she was never appointed a prestigious title, she never played an instrument, she was never bestowed a medal for bravery, never given a standing ovation,

never won first prize, never had "big shots" and "high brows" as friends, never was their a prominent seat reserved just for her, and never had a statue, plaque, or even a brick dedicated with her name, in thanks, for all her selfless contributions. But Josie was our hero. She was a giant. Josie was the best cook and baker, the hardest working, most intelligent, articulate, understanding, giving, forgiving, deep, astute, strong, willfull, brave, determined, adventurous, charismatic, energetic, sweet, funny and kind person. And the love she composed for so many people throughout her lifetime is some of the finest music ever played; and we are comforted by its undertones still. Josie was also beautiful; she looked like her mother Eliina, only with the dark hair and skin of her father.

Her fame extended across the ocean to Finland. When the family took Josie to Finland in 2005, well over 100 relatives, from all parts of Finland, and neighboring Scandinavia, gathered at a rented pavilion, to meet the daughter of Edvard and Eliina. It wasn't just the many first cousins near her age in attendance, but young relatives also planned time off from their jobs and Universities to honor her. As Josie stepped out of the car, nearly 30 women from the Kesti and Hautamaki families, welcomed her by lining in choir formation and singing a beautiful Finnish song. Josie's family never knew she'd been letter writing and sending gifts to Finland for decades. The women there spoke of the specialness all her gifts meant. When any material wore out from use or time or just old age, instead of discarding it; they appraised it with more value by cutting pieces and weaving them into their hand loomed rugs.

Josie leaves so many gifts behind, it is fitting that Kesti means "lasted," yet ironic, when the dream Edvard and Eliina had, was so short lived. Neither of them ever returned to Finland. Josie was their only child to visit both homesteads, which are still owned by the families, and within one mile from one another. Josie walked that mile, passing amidst the undaunted Finnish

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forest, from Eliina's childhood farm to Edvard's; the same walk that her parents must have taken together - hand in hand - countless times - when they were falling in love -nearly 100 years before.

Josie was always the conversationalist. It took sheer will and sisu, while in agony, when she knew she was finally losing herself..to whisper...the few last words... to her sons...a week before she died,..."I love you." It would be the final gift she would leave them. She had always been there for so many people; to nurse them when they were sick, wipe away their tears, and hold their hands when they were dying. It became the same loving honor and privilege, for son Eddie, to hold his mothers hand, and wipe away the one last tear, she was unable to hold back, before she died.

Josie was the embodiment of motherhood, the mother she herself lost as a little girl, and missed throughout her life. She will be remembered as such, by her three sons, Edward Setner, Chuck Nevaranta, David Nevaranta (Gail), and daughter-n-law, Peggy Setner, who became a real daughter to her. Nilo, her husband of 37 years died in 1984. Her first husband, Stanton Setner, passed away in 1994. Siblings, Reino, Elsi, Edwin and Taimi all preceded Josie in death. Her special friends, Clara Koski, Beatrice Maki, Irene Halvas, Aili Pajenen, Helvi Nelson, Aune Lepisto, and Irene Tellaricco are all gone. We are uncertain, if another childhood friend, Taimi Takala, is still living. Josie leaves behind nine grandchildren, four great-grandchildren with a fifth on the way, and two great-great grandchildren.

Josie loved to read and her favorite book was "Little Women." In the story, the

mother and daughters are together, and in the end the family is reunited with their father. Ironically, and

according to Josie's wishes, she will be buried with her sister, Elsi, next to their parents, Edvard and Eliina, in the Stambaugh Cemetery. Within the distance, you can see the remains of the Caspian mine where Ed Kesti worked. Further in the distance, the hopes and dreams this once happy family shared together in 1923, before Eliina died, have been torn down, along with the home in which they lived. Further still in the distance, on a beautiful day, if you close your eyes and use your imagination, you can hear the shrill screams and contagious laughter of Reino, Josie, and Elsi coming lickety split down Stambaugh Hill on their sled.

A private memorial service is planned in late Summer and will be attended by Josie's immediate family.

An aerial map of Finland shows her silhouette as a beautiful woman, and the Finns still say; 'one of her arms belongs to Sweden and a leg has been stolen by Russia.' Our families, both here and there are certain; that no matter how strong and independent she is, she has now become a woman unable to hold back her tears.

Elle Johanna Kesti (Ellen Nevaranta) is a recorded descendant of the fifth oldest family in Finland.

Condolences to the family of Elle Nevaranta may be expressed online at www.ernashfuneralhomes.com

The family has entrusted the Erickson-Rochon & Nash Funeral Home with the funeral arrangements.

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Tribute Wall

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“ *My deepest sympanhy to the family.
My mom & dad (Leo & Lily Ranta) enjoyed
being neighbors and enjoyed the
friendship of Nilo & Ellen for many years.
Barbara McCoy*

Barbara (Ranta) McCoy - Zephyrhills, FL - June 11, 2010 at 12:00 AM

GF

“ *I am so sorry to hear about Elle, I heard about it late, but wanted
you all to know i Love you and thinking about you all.*

Gloria Plank - Crystal Falls, MI - friend - June 09, 2010 at 12:00 AM