

# LIVES LIVED

**Laura Evelyn**

**Mooney Gingras O'Brien**

Mother of 10, stepmother of 12.

Born April 21, 1919, in Fort

Saskatchewan, Alta. Died Jan. 7, in

Richmond, B.C., of complications

from Parkinson's Disease, aged 82.

To say that my mother spent the last few days of her life surrounded by family is to state the obvious. When you have 10 children, 12 stepchildren, scores of nieces and nephews, and an ever-expanding multitude of grandchildren and great-grandchildren, it's unlikely that your parting moments will be lonely.

At the Richmond General Hospital, where my mother spent her final days, the nurses finally moved her into a private room. The constant stream of relatives was disrupting other patients. "Too many visitors, too much noise," the nurses told us, gently.

Around her bed we laughed uproariously, recounting well-worn family stories, and wept uncontrollably when she finally exhaled her last breath. It was a quiet end to an extravagantly full life.

My mother was born in Fort Saskatchewan, Alta., the seventh of 13 children (two were adopted). In 1941, she married my father, Robert Lee O'Brien, in Winnipeg, and soon thereafter they started their family. Seven children were born in various cities across Canada, and the last three were born just outside New York City. In July, 1959, five months after the birth of my younger sister, Patty, my father died of heart failure. Somehow my mother, who never weighed more than 100 pounds (except when pregnant!) gathered the 10 children now under her sole care and moved to Vancouver to begin a new life.



**Laura O'Brien**

Seven years later she married a widower, Larry Gingras, who had 12 children of his own. "Why did they do it? How did they do it?" my friends often ask me. I'm not sure, but some combination of selflessness and desperation probably convinced them that it would all work out. My stepfather died in 1986, leaving my mother once again widowed, this time at the age of 67.

There always seemed to be infinite room in my mother's house and in her heart. When I was still a child, my mother's twin brother, Uncle Fred, needed a place to live, and our home was opened to him. That he was covered from head to toe in psoriasis as a result of an explosion during his Second World War service, was never an issue.

When my Aunt Alma, who was blind and suffered from Down Syndrome, needed a home, my mother freely welcomed her. I still remember her walking throughout the house, her fingertips softly brushing the walls as she moved from room to room.

My paternal grandfather, a distinguished radiologist, also lived with us for his final years. He recited swaths of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village*, when it seemed appropriate. When someone laughed or shouted too loudly, for example, he would say: "*The watch-dog's voice that bay'd the whispering wind, And the loud laugh that spoke the vacant mind.*" We didn't always understand the quotes, but we always got the tone.

All of this caring for others meant an innate kindness that I am only now beginning to understand. My mother had few opportunities for travel, dining out or other daily pleasures, yet not once did I hear her complain or lament.

Growing up in such a family has its curiosities. That I was never called by my right name was merely one of the quirks I got used to. I remember my mom calling to me: "Eddy-Colleen-Maureen-Ada-Mae — whatever your name is, come here!"

My mother's Catholic faith sustained her through the tribulations of so many children and having been twice widowed. Go forth and multiply, it says in Genesis. Certainly her family continues to multiply and flourish. That each one of us is convinced that we were her favourite ("I'm the real fave," each one of us says) is one of her eternal legacies.

**Peter O'Brien**

*Peter O'Brien is the ninth child of Laura O'Brien Gingras.*