

Clarinda delivered this Eulogy in Los Angeles at the funeral of Jeannie Cheung. Jeannie was 57 years old, a marathon runner, mother of two grown daughters, a non-smoker and an inspiration to many. She lost her battle with lung cancer on February 7th, 2008.



2-16-2008

Dear Family and Friends of Jeannie Cheung,

My name is Clarinda Ross Gress, it is my honor to speak to you today about Jeannie's extraordinary love and compassion. Many of you do not know me personally but you do know me by association, I am Clara's mother. Raise your hand if you've heard Jeannie speak about Clara.

My daughter Clara is 19 now. Jeannie was Clara's aide, caregiver, cheerleader, Special Olympics coach, physical therapy assistant, and second mother from the time Clara was 8 years old. Jeannie's love for Clara knew no bounds for it was a mother's love. When other's doubted Clara could participate in a group or activity it was Jeannie who was her champion. Recently at Cindy's wedding I made a toast thanking Cindy

and her sister Christy, for generously loaning their mother to my daughter for these last few years. With Cindy and Christy all grown-up and at college Jeannie still had so much mother-love left to give. Our entire family reaped the benefit of Jeannie's empty nest. My boys came to love her and fought over who would get a special afternoon alone with Jeannie. As most of you know Jeannie did not need to work for us. She was quite well taken care of by her family. I daresay Clara is the one of the few Special Olympic Athletes to arrive at practice in a Porsche.

How unfair it seems that someone so full of compassion and grace could be taken from us all prematurely. We are left to wonder the lives she would have touched, the people she would have inspired the good she would have done in her remaining years. But Jeannie did not wait to inspire, to encourage a friend, or to love. She lived each day to its fullest. I witnessed firsthand, for ten years, her positive attitude and boundless energy. She did not shy away from a hard task, attending doctors' appointment with me helping to calm Clara's fears while Clara underwent procedures she could not comprehend. Real Moms can't be squeamish and Jeannie, a great mother understood that. She did the heavy lifting. I distinctly remember very early after Jeannie started working with us, Clara was maybe 9 years old, and Jeannie did the classic mom move. Holding one side of the nose – "Now blow Clara, good, wait Clara" then she switched sides and had Clara blow again (mime tossing used tissue). It was then and there, I knew I had indeed found a second mother for Clara. How lucky- for Clara needed two mothers. Clara is a tough customer and wore out many lesser helpers. Clara perseverates on food - left to her own devices she'd eat until she made herself sick. Jeannie was a *master* at the art of distraction. You can have your treat Clara AFTER you bounce the ball, swim to the wall, walk around the block three times, do the stairs six times, etc. I will never forget Jeannie's voice cheering Clara on to the next level, (picture her in her Nike running shoes) "Come on Clara, you can do it!"

Jeannie and I were twelve years apart in age so we shared the same sign in Chinese astrology, we are both Oxen. The moms, carrying the load taking care of others. A few weeks ago, we joked that in the next life we might try something more fun. No one could be a better Ox than Jeannie; she did all for her family, putting others needs above her own. My family, the Gresses, have been truly blessed by Jeannie's selflessness.

In the last months and days of Jeannie's life I tried to convey fully to her the deep river of my gratitude. For Jeannie, through her work with Clara, gave us the gift she has now been robbed of: the gift of time; time to pursue my career, take vacations with my husband, and time to relax. Because I was 100% certain that while Jeannie was in charge Clara was loved and cared for with a mother's devotion. Jeannie's *greatest* gift to me is this: I don't believe I would have other children if Jeannie had not come into my life. Clara is so all-consuming, but given Jeannie's help with Clara, my special Clara, who needs so much, the two of us, both oxen, pulling that load together, I felt I did have enough strength, enough *mother-love* to have more children. So, today I stand before you to publicly thank Jeannie for my greatest gifts Frank and Gus. If Jeannie had not been here to take care of Clara, I can't envision how I would have gotten through the infant and toddler stage with the two boys.

Clara and my next child Frank are also twelve years apart, they are both Dragons. For years Jeannie had made great fuss over Clara, being a Dragon. "Dragon is lucky Clarinda." she'd say. She gave Clara a jade dragon necklace and always, on special occasions the little red envelope of "lucky money". Jeannie was thrilled to learn early in 2000 that the baby I was carrying would be a boy and most importantly a Golden Dragon. "Oh, Clarinda you will have a *golden* dragon - the luckiest of all dragons and do you know that if you have *another* dragon - if you are the mother of *three* dragons you will be the great mother, the revered one, the blessed mother, always cared for in old age and honored?" I laughed and told Jeannie if I had another Dragon - do the math that would be 2012, that I would be a special guest on the Oprah

Winfrey show. So, Jeannie encouraged me to get busy and have another child to be Frank's playmate, and with great speed arriving only two years after Frank came my second son a lucky little Horse named Gus.

Jeannie and I discussed these boys often. I think she saw some of the same traits of her daughters Cindy and Christy reflected in Frank and Gus. We both knew that these little men would long outlive us both and it would be the two of them who would eventually take over our Oxen's job of looking out for their sister, Clara.

For the past several years the collective goal of Clara's two mothers was to prepare Clara to "*live in a house with friends.*" All the hours of therapy and the painstaking work, the repetition of small tasks - all of it was working towards this large looming goal- out there - one day - in the future - Clara would live in a group home with other girls like her. We called it *going to college*. Christy and Cindy went to college, and so would Clara in her way. Jeannie saw it as a natural part of life. Things change and you move on.

Clara's occupational therapist came to me in 2006 about six months before Jeannie's cancer diagnosis, and told me in her professional opinion Clara was indeed ready to make the move to group living. Well, I was stunned I was not ready, it was not time, *that* was the future, *off* in the future. Even though I respected the woman I completely ignored her advice.

Then right before Christmas 2006, Cindy and Jeannie broke the news to my husband Googy and me that Jeannie had received a stage 4 cancer diagnosis. We were, of course, heartbroken and yet amazed at Jeannie's determination. "I will live to see my daughter get married." became her mantra. And did she ever! She made it to not one but *two* weddings, despite grueling chemotherapy and pain.

It was Jeannie's diagnosis that prompted me to seriously begin to look for a group living situation for Clara. For I knew, Jeannie was irreplaceable, I knew my luck had run out; and I was forced to face the next stage of Clara's care. So once again Jeannie pushed her girl over the finish line. We found a suitable home and Clara's move coincided with her culmination ceremony at Santa Monica High School. It's a huge school with hundreds of students and Jeannie was determined Clara would take the walk alone without an aide. Jeannie really *insisted* we participate in the ceremony, secretly I wondered... would Clara know what was happening? Would she care? Jeannie in her wisdom wanted my boys to see their sister was not so different, she'd be one of all the other sisters and brothers on that day who would walk away from their families into their new lives of college or work. Jeannie wisely insisted, she knew on some level Clara would understand that she was big and this was important. Jeannie would see that Clara walked the walk. But like so many things in Clara's life - it was tricky, the graduating class of 2007 had to walk over this little bridge and everyone was nervous Clara would trip or fall - everyone but Jeannie. Jeannie coached her and practiced that walk with Clara. Understand she did this in between chemo treatments. When Jeannie could not physically be there herself (on chemo days) she let the aides at the school know they had better well get Clara down to that little bridge and *practice that walking*. I showed Jeannie a picture from Clara's graduation the other day and she said, "That was a good day." Jeannie took great pride as she should have in Clara progress and growth. I can tell you with certainty Clara could not have made the big move to "living in a house with friends" without her Jeannie. For years we'd say to her "Clara, pickup your jacket." "Put your plate in the sink." "Close the bathroom door." "If you live in a house with friends you can't do that." Over and over, little bit by little bit, the little engine that could, Clara, crossed her finish line. She walked that walk with all the other high school graduates cheered on by her Chinese mother.

Some of you were fortunate enough to witness Jeannie's walk down the aisle of the church in November at Cindy and Jeff's wedding. She was

the picture of elegance, grace and determination. On Cindy's wedding day I whispered in Jeannie's ear, "You did it! You just ran your greatest marathon."

Clara went to say good bye to Jeannie on the Sunday before they started Hospice. Knowing it would be Clara's last chance to see Jeannie I was really hoping she'd behave. She may be mentally retarded, but she is all *teenager*, and in the last year or so she's really rebelled in her own little way against me and Jeannie. This teenage rebellion of Clara's shook me to my core, for all her problems, Clara had always been so happy and sweet. Clara's rebelliousness didn't faze Jeannie a bit she was a professional mother, she'd already sheperded two girls through hormonal outbursts. When we brought Clara to see Jeannie before Christmas, Clara was not cooperating, she would not sit with Jeannie or hold her hand – nothing. Jeannie said, "That's okay, she's a big girl now. She's living in her house, she doesn't need Jeannie." But on this last Sunday, Clara climbed the stairs saying "Jeannie, Jeannie!" And, Jeannie heard her coming "There's my girl." she said. Clara ran around a little (I think she was looking for Kona and Baby- Jeannie's dogs), but finally she came up to Jeannie's bed and laid her head on Jeannie's chest and said, "Thank you."

Clara only has about 75 spoken words but she picked the perfect two, "Thank you." Jeannie kissed Clara softly on the top of her head. What a privilege it was for me to witness this perfect moment for there is nothing more to say to Jeannie who gave so much. Nothing more than a simple *thank you*.

I've tried to push my own selfish sadness about losing Jeannie aside and I told the Cindy after seeing Jeannie that Sunday that I would not come back. I know from my own family, Hospice is a difficult time and I thought Christy, Cindy and Mr. Cheung needed their space. Last Thursday, I was driving and literally did a u-turn on Olympic Boulevard, its Chinese New Year I thought. I went to the Party Store and got some Chinese New Year decorations –year of the Rat and some red "lucky

money” envelopes. I called Mr. Cheung and asked if I could come by. He was very emotional, and I could tell he was having a tough morning, but he said the doctor was just leaving and if I came right then it would be a good time. The nurse showed me in and helped me hang the decorations, Jeannie was unconscious. The nurse said “Go ahead and talk to her, she can hear you.” Really? I thought looking at the tiny person in the hospital bed. But, I leaned in and stroked her hair and kissed her all the while holding onto the red “lucky money” envelopes and said. “Jeannie, its Clarinda. I will never forget you. And I *promise* as long as I live I will give my children lucky money on Chinese New year from their Chinese mother, Jeannie Cheung. You will be remembered by me and my children. We will never forget you. Thank you, Chinese mother for all the luck you have brought me.” Jeannie’s eyes moved rapidly while I spoke, and she made small noises. I hope she heard my promise, I think she did. I told her she had run hard and now it was time to rest.

I was shocked to get Cindy’s call later that day telling me that Jeannie had passed, it seemed so soon, much too soon...But how befitting that she crossed the finish line on Chinese New Year’s day.

Thank you.