Best of Bridge Author Karen Brimacombe Dies

Cookbook writer was age 67

Gwendolyn Richards, Calgary Herald, November 24, 2010

She was a quick wit with a talent for language, a passion for high heels and a love of cooking that she and seven friends parlayed into a bestselling series of cookbooks.

The four remaining women in the Best of Bridge group, along with numerous friends and family, are now mourning the loss of Karen Brimacombe, who died Sunday at the age of 67 after battling cancer.

In an era when the bank told the women seeking funds to publish their cookbook they would need their husbands to sign for the loan, Karen Brimacombe and the rest of the ladies refused to back down, embarking on a 40-year adventure that would put 3.5 million copies of their books into kitchens across the country and beyond.

Together, they dealt with weddings, divorces, illnesses, the births of children and then grandchildren, all with laughs, support and, occasionally, a cocktail in one hand.

"Put any eight women together for 32 years in business -- and 45 years of friendship -- and that will represent everything that happens to a microcosm of people," said Mary Halpen, Karen Brimacombe's friend and fellow Best of Bridge member.

Karen Brimacombe had known about her cancer since January, and her friends and family spent as much time as possible with her.

Out of the seven that made up the group, three have been lost: Marilyn Lyle, Linda Jacobsen and now Karen Brimacombe, said Mary Halpen.

"I never had any sisters. This was just like I had whole bunch of sisters," she said.

But in the days that have followed Karen Brimacombe's passing, it is the funny stories about her that keep coming to mind.
She was educated as a teacher but never made a career of it. Instead, she translated those skills into the cookbook business. Using her math expertise, she'd pull out her bejewelled calculator to organize orders and handle the group’s finances; she was also the one to whom others turned for language questions.

"We always called her Miss Crawford (her maiden name)," Mary Halpen said. "If we had to get a clarification on any spelling or syntax, we'd say, 'Let's ask Miss Crawford.'"

But Karen Brimacombe was a quick wit and had a "wicked sense of humour," Mary Halpen said.

Together, she and Mary Halpen compiled most of the jokes that run at the bottom of the recipes in the books.

Her favourite one-liner was, "Probably nothing in the world arouses more false hopes than the first four hours of a diet."

Later in life, she fell in love with crossword puzzles, which took advantage of her passion for language.

It was a hobby that exercised her mind; she had little interest in exercising her body, Mary Halpen said.

A shoe enthusiast with "great legs," Karen Brimacombe loved to wear high heels. A pair of red sequined heels bought on a book tour were favourites, even though they were a half-size too small.

As their children grew older, and the group of women started taking up golf and planning hiking trips, Karen Brimacombe resisted.

"She said, 'I have no intention of taking up anything that can't be done in high heels,'" Mary Halpen recalled.

"She didn't like exercising, (but) she always looked like a million bucks."

The group's recipe for carrot cake will be featured on the back of the program for her service on Saturday.

It's a fitting addition for the woman known among the group for always finding the best recipes for sweets.

"She knew what made a good dessert, not a boring cake or pie. It always had a neat twist," Mary Halpen said.
Bob Dees, president of Robert Rose Inc., which publishes the Best of Bridge books, said he had got to know the women over the past five years and knew there were retirement plans for travel and family time.

"It's just incredibly sad," he said. "They've made such a contribution to the lives of so many people."

Pictured Left to Right

Joan Wilson, Helen Miles
Karen Brimacombe, Mary Halpen