

**Testimony before the Senate Special Committee on Aging  
Wednesday, July 23, 2008**

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Family Member of GREEN HOUSE® Resident Mary Valentine  
Lincoln, NE**

Senator Casey, Chairman Kohl, Ranking Member Smith, and fellow Committee members thank you for inviting me to testify this morning.

I am Zoe Holland, and I come to you from the Heartland of America to speak about a matter that is very close to us all. My assignment this morning is to tell you a story. To speak to your imaginations and hearts.

On March 26, 1906, a red haired baby girl was born to Elizabeth and Andrew Boicourt on their small farm in Minden, Nebraska. They named this child, who was their sixth, Mary Josephine. She grew to love all fragile helpless creatures, and music and science and art and poetry as well. She was my mother and this is her story.

Mary left her home for Omaha, to fulfill her dream of becoming a nurse. Her life exemplified the noblest qualities of this profession. This beautiful, soft-spoken and gentle redhead became the wife of a physician and surgeon, Dr. L.F. Valentine. She was at his side from the time he was a country doctor in Nebraska through the later years of his medical practice in Santa Monica. They raised two children.

Fiercely independent, Mary returned to Nebraska in her 90<sup>th</sup> year to set up home in a high-rise apartment. She was on the top floor, with an amazing view of trees and clouds. She created lovely rooms, and enjoyed flowers, her French Impressionists, music and small cheese and wine gatherings, as well as family birthday parties and holiday celebrations. She was so grateful and happy to be there and made many new friends.

Suddenly, in 2002, Mary suffered an illness that required treatment and care only available in a nursing home. This coincided with my knee replacement surgery, and the

realization that I was also a senior, and no longer strong enough to provide for her health care needs. We were both very sad.

After exploring several possibilities, she and we chose Tabitha Health Care Services in Lincoln. My daughter helped me sort out her things... all those lovely treasures for which there would be no room where she was going to live. Goodbye to the art, the music, the many books, shoes, clothes, and mementoes of her rich and fulfilling life. No place for the photos of dear ones. Her imagination would need to hold them close.

For the first time since I was a kid and she caught me smoking, she was angry with me. For several days, when I would approach, she turned her back to me and faced the wall and would not speak. I know she felt betrayed by the one person for whom she had given so much.

And who could blame her? She had always disciplined herself to exercise daily. Now there was no room. She shared a very small room with a curtain partition. She was near the door and the bathroom with no window to look out. She was nearly blind and her space was very dark. One of her problems was incontinence, and sharing a bathroom with a constipated person was not helping that situation.

Visits of family and friends gradually tapered off. I attribute this to the depressing environment. There was only space for one person at a time in her room, while others waited in the hall. After she was moved to the second floor, she could no longer wander independently outdoors.

As the days went by, we watched the light that had shone so brightly for so many years grow very dim. Mother spent as much time sleeping as possible because there was nowhere to go. Flowers brought to her room withered and wilted overnight and we were watching her do the same thing. She was most appreciative of her care, reminding me that the staff – Linda, Lisa, Tammi and Julie – were doing the best they could. There was no one consistent staff person we could contact about the way she had spent her day. She did have several falls, fractures, while at Tabitha. The dining area was very crowded, with tight places for servers around wheel chairs. Granddaughter Liz, when

she came to play her violin, had to perform in the hallway and no one could see her. And there was no piano for her great granddaughter Emily. Emily did find a way to be close to Mary, who was nearly blind and deaf. She brushed her hair and fixed her nails, and would sit snuggled very close to her on her bed.

Family members faithfully sent her cards, little gifts and messages of encouragement, reminding her that she was still important to our lives. We began planning the centennial birthday party nearly a year in advance. It did lift her spirits, knowing friends and family were coming from Washington, Oregon, Colorado, New York state, and Glasgow. This was a grand and glorious event, with candles, balloons, piano, violin, pipes and drums, toasts and tributes. But the greatest gift of all was her selection to be one of the first elders to move into the new GREEN HOUSE® Home at Tabitha.

*“Sometimes our light goes out but is blown into flame by another human being. Each of us owes deepest thanks to those who have rekindled this light.” – Albert Schweitzer*

To each and every one in the Green House who rekindled our Mother’s light, our deepest thanks.

Suddenly, to Mary Valentine, life mattered again. With light flooding through her window, her brand new furniture and bedspread, she sent us scurrying to recover her lost treasures. Out came the china tea cups, the glass of Oregon sand with the sea shells, the photos of her husband, son, grandchildren and great grandchildren. The French Impressionists were back, and she once again began to plan for entertaining guests in her home. Remembering how she had always been a lady of fashion and style, she turned her attention to her closet. Soon my sewing machine was humming. A person who had always lived in the service of others was living a full life again. She could sleep in as late as she pleased in the morning and still have breakfast. A Shahbazim, like Monica, would attend to her hair, nails, and clothes selection for that day. Monica once took a dress home with her to iron so Mary would not be wrinkled. Every night she donned a soft floral night gown and was lovingly tucked into bed.

During the day she could sit in her tiny recliner that fit her tiny body and hold a tiny Chihuahua, Tupac, who belonged to a staff member, Thomas. They were a good fit. She was convinced that Tupac preferred to be wrapped in a fine silk scarf when he was held on her lap.

That year of 2006 belonged to Mary. The Green House itself was the scene of many celebrations, dinners, and some of them were ours. Granddaughter Liz played her violin on several occasions. Family and friends arrived throughout the year from Hawaii, Seattle, Long Beach, New Mexico, and Mother could play the gracious hostess, one of her favorite roles. I would often take our Newfoundland, Argus, to visit Mother, Tupac, and the elders.

For the first time in many years, my husband Mike and I felt free to travel, knowing Mother was secure and comfortable, and oh, so happy! We could contact her caregivers daily and expect an accurate and thorough report. They also called us if they had a special concern.

Mary's 101<sup>st</sup> birthday has already been told, retold, recorded, documented, as it was observed on the porch with Tupac in his silk scarf on her lap as she smoked her celebratory cigarette and toasted the good life with a Margarita.

Framed on Mother's Wall:

*"These many beautiful days cannot be lived again, but they are compounded in my own flesh and spirit. And I take them in full measure toward whatever lies ahead." – Daniel Berrigan, S.J.*

April 17, 2007 was a soft and gentle spring day, almost perfect... and was to be the last day of Mary's life on earth. I had been recovering from a hip replacement and had not seen her for ten or more days. Mike called on her and they sat on the porch and had a pleasant visit. Later Monica walked with her, and told me how astonished she had been when Mother stated that she had heard a dove singing, since Mother was quite deaf. Monica then saw the dove. Later that evening, she fell and was taken to the hospital.

Attended by a beautiful red-haired young nurse, with Shahbaz Monica present, she died with the gentle grace and quiet beauty that had exemplified her life on earth... in the arms of her beloved granddaughter Ann. In my announcement of her death I wrote this, "The staff at Tabitha and the Green House loved her fiercely and are grieving mightily. Please pray for these angels on earth." In May, her remains were buried beside her son on a hillside in Eugene Oregon.

## **Afterward**

On September 29, 2007, a memorial was dedicated in her honor at Tabitha. On the porch of the Green House in Lincoln, a fountain with a statue of the big dog standing on his hind legs with his paws on the bowl welcomes all visitors. Balloons were released with loving thoughts of Mary attached to dog biscuits. There were cookies and drinks and stories and laughter. Thomas was there and so was Tupac. But the big black Newfoundland had been called to dog heaven that morning.

In Mother's last room, lives now a sweet small redhead, whose name is Gwen. She is a former music teacher, and the room looks so much the same as when Mother was there. Gwen also likes floral and feminine fragile things. Gwen has a daughter who visits her, and once in a while I stop in with a flower.

She understands that sometimes I just need to be there.

March 26, 2008. Mike and I took a couple of friends, one who shared a birthday with Mother, and had a little Margarita party with chips and dip. Nearly all the elders and Shahbazim gathered in the living area and we told Mary stories. We also want each of these elders to know that when they are no longer there, someone will be remembering them, too.

And that is one person's story. But it is not the end of our story.

## **What Can this Success Mean for America?**

*“Where, after all, do universal rights begin? In small places, close to home... so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world... unless those rights have meaning there, they have no meaning anywhere.” – Eleanor Roosevelt*

We have constructed a democratic system which – through its agencies and institutions – works to provide sustenance and direction for all its citizens, almost, but not quite, across their life spans. We have fallen just a wee bit short.

It’s time for us to cover that gap. How do we do it? “In small places, close to home, so small they cannot be seen on any map,” as Eleanor Roosevelt suggested... or, just maybe, build more places like Green House. And why?

Because it works. There are observable, measurable and quantifiable data to support our storytelling.

Because place matters... To quote Bill Thomas, “LIFE MATTERS”

And that is the heart of the matter.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before you today and tell the story of my mother, Mary Valentine.