

# LEGACY

BY MARY JOAN OEXMANN

When *Charlotte Living* traveled to Kiawah Island for a photo shoot, our friend Mary Joan Oexmann from James Island put on her Captain's hat and treated us to a beautiful sail around Charleston along with Captain Paul Mitchell. Mary Joan is a woman of extraordinary talents. She is an artist, nutritionist and sailor with fascinating stories to tell. She paints with poured oils, plays her Steinway piano and is a prolific writer. Mary Joan built a day care center in Guyana (MJ's) and wrote a book about nutrition and faith. Here are excerpts from her piece on *Legacy* for you to ponder and enjoy! – *Kathy Buckley, Editor-in-Chief*

Yesterday was my birthday. The date doesn't matter. We all have them. It is a shared opportunity to think about the past and explore the future, no matter the age.

As a nutritionist, I created a health education program called "Lighten Up". I conducted it in about 30 churches through the Medical University of South Carolina. Much of the funding came through the Duke Endowment. The mission was to improve health through nutrition, exercise, and spiritual growth. It was based on an eight-week study of the spiritual fruits including love, knowledge, peace, faith, kindness, joy, self-control, and Godliness.

The "fruit" is easy, but of greater importance is how we deal with the "sour grapes" or opposites including indifference, ignorance, chaos, doubt, selfishness, sorrow, temptation, and materialism. As we progressed to Godliness, I encouraged participants to write their own obituary. It does sound morbid, but it is an interesting challenge to think about your legacy.

Even though we know death will come, we don't know when or how. It is much easier to put it off for another day. Last September, I fell down the stairs and broke my neck, and it stopped me in my tracks. It was a C-2 fracture. I was told that I came very close to either paralysis or death.

Healing of the fractured bone could be done by wearing a Minerva body brace 24-7 for three months. No exceptions. You learn to adapt and focus. My cat, Friday, was "purrfect" for keeping me still as I slowly and carefully began to move where everything was harder.

By Christmas, I was released from Minerva to begin both the hard and painful work of physical therapy. It was like breaking my neck all over again, but in slow motion! *I share this with you to assure you that no matter how well we plan, things do happen.*

I encourage everyone to put down the digital device and think about your legacy. What do you want to be remembered for? Do you have a bucket list? Are their conflicts in your life that can be resolved today?

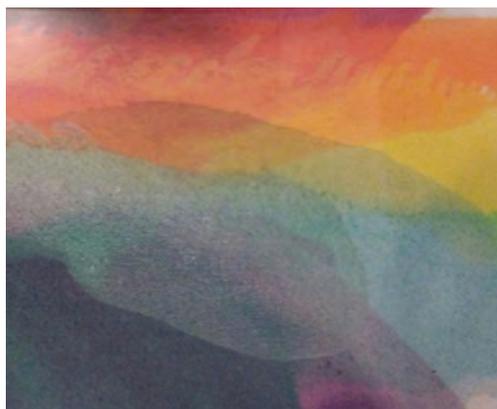
People don't care what you know until they know

that you care. As a nutritionist, I knew that the patients I would see dreaded seeing me. Why? They knew that I was going to try to take away something they like. I wouldn't want to see me either! This changed when people understood that I was there as their advocate.

With "Lighten Up" I began the group discussions with "no shame, no blame, no fault, no guilt." This



**People don't care what you know until they know that you care.**



*Day Break* by Mary Joan Oexmann.  
Poured oils on water color paper. (No brushes)

helped to clean the slate with an attitude of "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." We could focus on single changes that would have the greatest health benefit. Let the negotiation begin!

"DIET" is a four-letter word with the word "die" in it. It sets up a pattern of eventual failure when foods are classified as either "good" or "bad". People will make it personal and begin to see themselves as "good" or "bad" based on compliance with an impossible regime. None of us want our legacy to be one of "failure". Variety and moderation is much more powerful over time.

During my recovery from the fall, there was a tremendous outpouring of love and encouragement. It was beyond anything I had ever experienced. *It was the visits, the meals, the phone calls, and the prayers which worked together to lift me up from the cavity of fear and uncertainty. I realized that my legacy is all about relationships.* It is not about any of the "stuff" one can accumulate.

Two of my dearest and sweetest friends from the "Lighten Up" days are cousins. Ercelle (age 103) and Ruth (age 100) frequently checked on me. One of my greatest joys is having them over for lunch. For years, Ruth and I walked many early mornings.

Ercelle has always demonstrated the "gratitude attitude." I have heard her prayers of thanksgiving and concern for others. I have experienced her joy in the Lord. These young ladies are living testimonies of a legacy that can heal generations. *I encourage everyone who reads this to give some time and energy to the elderly.*

As I write this and think about my own legacy, my hope is that I will be remembered for my joy in building relationships that matter. May each day be lived as one step closer to eternity. Let there be plenty of fun along the way through the creative spirit. I pour oil paints onto water color paper. It is art which comes through my mother who was a wonderful artist who still had so much more to do when she died of ovarian cancer at age 63. Her legacy continues to live through me. *The art I create cannot be forced. One must retain the creative spirit of a child. It can be very liberating. Find your joy and touch the hearts of others!*