



Bette Rowland

January 4, 1934 - November 23, 2016

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Bette McKeithen Rowland January 4, 1934 – November 23, 2016 The amazing Bette McKeithen Rowland is now twinkling in the stars, joining her husband Roney who predeceased her this past June. Born in Wellborn, FL January 4, 1934, to the late Alex and Louise McKeithen, Bette graced us last in Saint Augustine, FL November 23, 2016. Left to celebrate her are three children, Skip (Nina) Rowland, Liz (Cliff) Ballard, and Carol (Davis) Deal, and five grandchildren, Lex Rowland, Beau Rowland, Belle Ballard, Maddie Ballard, and Lila Ballard; her brother Lex McKeithen, and countless cousins, nieces, and nephews. Amazing? Without a doubt! Amazing as an everyday, extraordinary daughter, cousin, niece, friend, classmate, co-worker, wife, neighbor, mother, grandmother, aunt. Everywhere that Bette went she was the smile, the laugh, the helping hand. She lived an agenda-free life, focused on enjoying life to its fullest and trying to help those around her do the same. While Bette was born in a small house in a small town in the middle of nowhere, halfway between Tallahassee and Jacksonville, there was nothing small about the life she led. Her father Alex McKeithen, the eldest son of ten siblings, was not only a promising baseball pitcher recruited by the Boston Red Sox, was also invited to play in the first Masters golf tournament. When his father died unexpectedly, Alex had to forego his athletic ambitions to assume the mantle of family patriarch and help raise his younger siblings and

manage his father's business holdings. Her mother Louise was a talented artist who made their home, ultimately working as a librarian in the Live Oak Library. Bette was one of TWENTY-TWO first cousins! Her entire life revolved around family, no matter how far and away life took them. She grew up working and playing with her cousins. As only one of a handful of girl cousins, she had little choice but to strap on a pair of boxing gloves to stake her claim in the cousinhood. A typical tom-boy, she could bait her own hook and clean her own fish. However, before play, she pulled her weight around the house, not only collecting eggs from the hen-house, but cleaning the coops. At her father's side, she picked vegetables from the farm and then cooked and canned them. The simple lessons lasted her a lifetime and gave her the deepest appreciation not only for modern conveniences, but also for those that toil. Bette was unstoppable. Totally unstoppable. No matter what life threw at her, she rolled with it. When she was six, her home burned to the ground on Christmas eve, leaving her and her parents with not much more than their lives. They moved in with her father's parents, only to be joined by more aunts, uncles, and cousins as their families faced their own challenges. Four families under one roof. More life lessons and values were learned. Bette was the neighborhood baby-sitter, caring for younger cousins and neighbors. Shortly after she turned 9, those skills were put to the ultimate test when Alex and Louise brought home her younger brother, Lex. Even though their age differences separated them in many ways, the sibling bond was always there, especially when Lex would hide behind the sofa while boys came to visit Bette. Perhaps the most stressful time of Bette's life was when her baby brother was flying fighter jets over North Viet Nam during that conflict; she did not rest easy until he was no longer involved in combat. When she was ready for high school, some well-meaning relatives felt that a public school education in rural Suwanee County would not be enough for her, and they arranged for her to attend Bob Jones Academy in Greenville, SC. After a year at this boarding school, Bette informed her parents that she would not be returning, but instead wanted to attend Suwanee High School in Live Oak,

Florida (a mere 11 miles west of Wellborn). Her parents consented and she returned to their new home in Live Oak. Bette was smart, funny, and beautiful – inside and out. After spending the summer between her sophomore and junior years with an aunt in New York, she returned home to have a number of young men vying for her attention; the local paper published the news that she had won the title “Queen of the Valley” in a beauty contest. She spent two years as a Suwanee Bulldog, only to have her well-meaning relatives again convince her parents that she would get a better education if she was focused on academics rather than the sports, cheerleading, and dating she had enjoyed the previous two years. Consequently, she graduated from BJA in 1952. From high school, Bette went to Virginia Intermont College in Bristol, Virginia. This was quite an experience for the girl from Florida, one that lasted until the mountain snow proved too cold. At the end of this first semester, she decided to continue her studies at Florida State University in Tallahassee. After completing her junior year at Florida State University, she went to New York to spend the summer with an aunt and work at a Grossinger’s, one of the largest resorts in the Catskills. While there she worked as a waitress and had the opportunity to wait on Rocky Marciano (he trained at the resort during his fighting days). On the last day of summer, the last day of work, she slipped and broke her leg and was unable to travel until Thanksgiving. Feeling too far behind, she elected to go to join the workforce rather than continue her formal education. She went to work for the state, manning the Florida Welcome Center on US 1. Opening and closing the center 5 days a week, her beaming smile greeted 1000s and 1000s and 1000s of visitors to Florida. Her love for people and love of her home state made her the perfect tonic for road-weary visitors stopping for a break and a sip of fresh-squeezed Florida orange juice. Unfortunately, a debilitating bout of pneumonia cut short her career with the state. Nevertheless, she bounced back and found another job in Jacksonville, working in an office. This lasted nearly a year until a freak accident nearly claimed her life. She had taken a bus home to Live Oak and after stepping off

the bus was hit by a car. Bones broken, organs bruised, she was in a coma for over a month. Defying all odds and prognoses, she came out of it to spend another five months in bed and many more months recovering before returning to Jacksonville yet again to take a job in the Gulf Life Insurance Company's home office. Jacksonville was booming in the late 50's and Bette relished life there, working in the city and playing on the beaches. It was there she met her future husband, Roney Rowland, an insurance executive. After a few short months of dating, he made the best decision of his life and asked her to marry him. They spent 58 years together, and through the course of their marriage she supported his career, raised their children, and made their home. Wherever they moved – from Jacksonville, FL to Richmond, VA to Chester, VA to South Hill, Va to Pennsylvania to Raleigh, NC to Bracey, VA to South Hill (again) and to Saint Augustine, FL – she was the connector that plugged them into their new community, making friends, entertaining, volunteering, and carving a place for them. For her children, Skip, Liz, and Carol, she was a room mother, den mother, scorekeeper, chauffeur, mentor, teacher, friend. She never ran out of band-aids or hugs. She was their cheerleader and champion, always there when they got knocked down, ready to pick them up, dust them off, and then put them back out there to fight their own fights. Running home to hide behind Mommy was not an option for her kids. When it came to encouraging them, she never said, “No, you can't do that.”, regardless how far-fetched or outrageous their plans were, unless it involved something potentially life-threatening. They were never discouraged from exploring their curiosities or challenging their world and grew up believing anything was possible. As time passed, Bette found herself having to split her attention between her children to the rest of her family. She was a care-giver, assisting aunts, uncles, grandparents, and parents as they needed, even though it often meant making the 10-15 hour trip back to Florida on her own. And these values were engrained in her children, easily evidenced by how they put their own lives aside this past year to care for their father, then her, and now each other. The Sound of Music. Herb Alpert. Dave

Brubeck. Count Basie. Louis Armstrong. Elvis. Aerosmith? Anything was welcome on Bette's turntable. Housekeeping was never a chore. Her routine started with a stack of vinyl and a houseful of tunes. If there was music, her fingers would drum, her toes would tap, and if there was room to move, she would be dancing, even if no one else was. More often than not, she would ask, "How can you just sit there with this music playing." And there she would go, twisting by the pool. Bette was the ultimate snap-shooter. A typical new mother, she took to photography shortly after having her first child. The magic never wore off and she proceeded to take 1000s and 1000s of photos over the years. Since getting into digital photography nearly ten years ago, she easily took another 10,000 photos. She never considered herself a photographer; she just enjoyed capturing reminders. Even though most of her photos are family photos, she never missed a chance to capture something that piqued her interest. Animals, plants, landscapes, sunrises, it didn't matter. If she thought someone else might find it interesting, she would try to take a photo of it. Many times she tried grabbing shots from the passenger seat when the driver was too hurried to pull over. When it came to people, she was the commemorator. Not a gathering or event went by without Bette pulling out a camera to take photos to share. When she shot film, she always got double prints and would usually end up ordering copies if two weren't enough. When it came to digital, she could barely wait to get her photos on her computer so that she could email them to her friends and family. Bette was the official unofficial archivist for her family history. Over the course of her 80+ years she collected and catalogued 1000s of family photos, some over 100 years old. Her collection is not simply a haphazard assortment of prints in a shoebox; it's a visual legacy spanning six generations family, friends, homes, cities, towns, vacations, and more. A visit with Bette's photos is much more than a stroll down memory lane. No, it's more like an extended daytrip on the highway of life. Bette cooked. It's a known fact that everyone's mother makes the best spaghetti. The reality is that she made THE BEST SPAGHETTI (among many other things). She grew up in her parents' kitchen and never lost her love of

food, making it and eating it. While most people make sure they have their keys and wallet when they leave the house, Bette also made sure to have a bottle of Tabasco with her, just in case her destination didn't have any. She read. No, she READ. When some people move to a new town, they find the grocery store, the drug store, the post office. Bette's priorities also demanded finding the library and a book store. She crafted. Knitting, crocheting, embroidery – she did it all and was always working on something. And it was nearly always something for someone else: baby socks and knit-caps, Christmas stockings, sweaters. She knitted for cancer patients and the homeless. She knitted whenever anyone asked for anything. There is no counting how many people have worn something hand-made by Bette. There are those that leave behind hard-to-fill shoes. Bette has left behind a seat that will be very empty and very hard to fill – a seat at the game table. No matter where she lived, Bette found a game group. Bunko and bridge were her favorites, but she was always up for anything that brought people together. Cribbage, dominoes, gin rummy, Russian bank, Yahtzee, you name it: if it involved shuffling cards or rolling dice, she would play it. Hot-air balloon ride? Glider ride? Helicopter ride? Edge of a volcano? Game for anything, Bette wouldn't turn down the chance to experience a thrill. Bette remembered birthdays, anniversaries, children and grandchildren's names. She knew what you were interested in and sent you articles that she ran across. Even though the US Postal Service can request additional funding to make up for the lost revenue she represented, there is no way to measure the void left in our mailboxes. Bette was a sparkle in the ocean. One of her life's constants was her love of the water. Oceans, seas, springs, rivers, lakes, ponds – all were home to her. She swam, fished, tubed, boated, skied, walked, exercised. No matter where she lived, she always found her way to the water. When Roney finally retired after over forty years of corporate life, Bette was a bit concerned as to how things would be with him around all the time. In reality, it took little time for them to adjust to their new life together. They travelled, dined,

cruised, and entertained. Their home was always open to family and friends; hosting reunions and get-togethers, they were often the hub for the wide circle of friends they collected over the years. Most important, though, was enjoying their children and grandchildren. Bette adopted her children's spouses, holding Nina, Cliff, and Dose as near to her heart as if they were her own, appreciating each in her own special way. She was so warm and welcoming that the bonds of family grew exponentially stronger with each new addition. For the past twenty years, Bette enjoyed nothing more than being a grandmother – Mema – and what a grandmother she was. More than cards, letters, and gifts, she made every effort to be a part of their lives. Even though a compound fracture nearly 20 years ago severely limited her mobility, she was undeterred in attending events and she never missed an opportunity to grab snapshots to share. As with her children, she always encouraged her grandchildren to follow their dreams and passions, to believe in themselves as much as she believed in them, and to never waste an opportunity. Time with Mema was never about her; it was always about the kids. Playing cards, doing puzzles, cooking, reading, swimming – Bette shared her passions with them to everyone's enjoyment. With a deck of cards she could erase boredom, with a pair knitting needles she could capture imagination. She has left them a legacy of love, passion, confidence, and caring that they will carry for all their time. For Bette, life was a matter of living and loving, laughing when times were good, then getting up and dusting off after getting knocked down. She might not have been happy with every twist and turn, but she ultimately would make the most of it, whether it meant having to pack and move, recover from broken bones, or ultimately face a terminal diagnosis. When she was told she had 6-8 months to live, she said it felt like a kick in the gut. Two hours later, she said, "I'll be ok. We'll just make the most of it. One day at a time." And for the next three and a half weeks, that is exactly that is what she did. Bette was there with Roney to his end and now they are joined for eternity, enjoying an endless sunset happy hour with a bottomless bucket of oysters. A memorial service will be planned in the future. The family ask that, in lieu of flowers,

donations be made to a local hospice; the care and assistance they received from Community Hospice at the Bailey Center was beyond measure, especially in making it possible for Bette to find peace at home with her family.

Arrangements are under the care of St Johns Family Funeral Home & Crematory.

Tribute Wall

JE

“ *I'm sure going to miss that beautiful smile on Wednesday mornings at the Bridge Club. What a joy she was! And what a worthy tribute you have written.*

June Entman - December 09, 2016 at 12:00 AM

SW

“ *Skip, What a wonderfully touching testimony to your Mom! The obit was beautiful and proof of the treasure that Bette was to her family and friends. You are all in our thoughts and prayers.*

Shirley & David Lee Wilkins - November 28, 2016 at 12:00 AM

TG

“ *Yes, she was amazing. I was one of her bunco players and am so glad to have known her. Death leaves a heartache No one can heal; Love leaves a memory No one can steal.*

Trish Gilpin - November 28, 2016 at 12:00 AM

JH

“ *So sorry that you have lost your mother. Your tribute was wonderful and the real measure of one's life is how they raised their children. Our observation is that she is at the head of the class. As her children are caring, loving, and first class all the way. Our donation will go to Care Dimension in Danvers where Riley was cared for in the most loving way. Many of them are still in our lives.*

John & Lana Huston - November 27, 2016 at 12:00 AM

EC

“ Sending you and your family our deepest sympathies on the passing of your Mom, Bette. Her love and perseverance shines through each of you. May the many good memories comfort you during this difficult time. Love to all - The Chism family.

Elizabeth Chism - November 26, 2016 at 12:00 AM

MR

“ I only knew you for a little while after we met at St. Augustine Bridge Club, but from the beginning I felt like I always knew you. Kindred spirits to the end. Love, Marie Russo

Marie Russo - November 26, 2016 at 12:00 AM

RM

“ Skip and family, we ar so sorry for your loss of Skip's mom. From her story so elegantly told here, she was one amazing woman who loved and lived life to the fullest. Remember all those wonderful deeds and adventures as you celebrate a life well lived. Much love to you all!

Rose and Mo - November 25, 2016 at 12:00 AM

BR

“ Skip so sorry to hear about your Mom, i read your tribute she was a unique person. prayers to you and your family Regards, Bob

Bob Reddan - November 25, 2016 at 12:00 AM

KD

“ I am so sorry to hear about your mom/grandmother. What a wonderful lady she was! Sending prayers for comfort and healing to all of you. Karen

Karen Davis - November 25, 2016 at 12:00 AM