



Excerpts from an essay written by James Jacobs, one of Millie's students, a few hours after her death.

The lesson was over. Millie fixed me a sandwich after the lesson, which was normal practice for her: she fed all her students. She taught a punishing schedule, seven days a week, 10–12 hours a day, but she would allow ninety minutes for each student, which would create time for food and talk.

"I can't make my lesson next week, Millie."

"Why?"

"I have to go to court. I'm becoming a ward of the court. I can't live with my mother any more."

I was thirteen years old. My father died when I was six. Two years later my mother sustained severe brain damage from a car accident. I was the youngest of five children; my two oldest sisters took on some guardianship roles during the next few years, but by the time I was eleven all my siblings had moved out and I was left alone with my mother, surviving on government checks. My mother by this time had the mental and emotional capacity of a nine-year-old, and needed a kind of care I couldn't provide for her. For my part, I had always veered between being a gregarious, promising student and being a reclusive, non-housebroken anti-social monster, and at this moment the monster was winning. I was lazy, pretentious, dishonest and smelly. As a musician, I was not without talent but was no prodigy, and even though I certainly knew a lot about music and was an excellent sight-reader I lacked the discipline to practice enough, or to practice correctly when I did. While I somehow had lots of friends, I was not well socialized and was capable of saying and doing really inappropriate, hurtful things. Anyone who knew me then (and a number of my Facebook friends did) will attest to the accuracy of this. Why Millie should have taken me on as a student, one that did not pay her a cent, despite my seeming hopelessness is something that puzzled many of her friends and other students, and why she should have gone even further in her support of me is still inexplicable, but in response to my reason for my upcoming absence, she said:

"You can always stay with me for a few weeks."

I stayed with her for three years. During that time she moved from her house on Russell Street, to a few months crashing with the Simon family and her adult student Jesse Rabinowitz, and finally to the house she lived in for over a third of a century, 3039 College Avenue. I saw the house before she gave the order to knock down the walls separating the three front rooms, creating one gigantic, welcoming front room that could serve as a workshop space, community meeting room, rehearsal space for Cello Bash (more on that in a bit), and a 60-seat concert hall. Knocking down those walls was a statement of purpose and a declaration of intent, of the kind of home she believed in. She kept her front door unlocked. Anyone could come at any time. There was always a spare bed for out-of-town visitors and a refrigerator full of delicious food anyone could help themselves to.

It soon became evident that it did not work for Millie to be both my cello teacher and my foster mother, so she sent me to work with Colin Hampton. It was a tumultuous three years. But I still consider myself Millie's student. Most of what I learned from her was not from my own lessons with her, but from observing her giving lessons to others. That was my real education. One of her mottoes was "In addition to, not instead of," and that applied to everything she did. Nothing was done at the expense of anything else; she always managed to get everything in, and she helped organize her students to do the same. She would draw up "practice modules" for her students. One she drew up for me when I first started studying with her included, every day: 30 minutes on scales and arpeggios; 30 minutes on a Popper etude; 30 minutes on a movement from a Bach suite; 30 minutes on the first movement of the Haydn C Major cello concerto. No matter if you have a competition or a big performance coming up, you still have to practice your scales. No matter if the issue du jour is your bow hold, you still have to spend some time with your left hand. And you have to keep up with your homework at school. And you have to

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come out to hear your fellow students perform. And you have to stay late at Millie's house to eat ice cream and listen to Bessie Smith records and discuss James Joyce and play Scrabble and take long walks and get to the bottom of the problems facing someone in the community. It's all important, and you have to budget your time to get it all in. You didn't have to actually live with Millie, as I did, to feel like you lived with her, if you were going to stick around and take in all these experiences.

I have to stress that word "important." Millie made all these things feel necessary, and she did not have much patience for those who did not share her priorities. If you surrendered and went along for the ride, you were amply rewarded, but that required a sense of discipline and confidence in one's identity that not all of her students shared. It's no secret that she traumatized some students, to an extent that complicates her legacy for some people. I remember asking her, after witnessing her teach a lesson in which she gave a student a particularly hard time, "Why did you call her lazy? Couldn't you just tell her she was out of tune?" She replied, "Because her bad intonation is a result of laziness – lazy thinking, lazy listening, lazy about everything." It should be noted that she was a great admirer of Pablo Casals, and was fond of a quote of his: "Intonation is a matter of conscience." There's a moral aspect to proper technique, he seems to be saying; you can't be a good person and a bad musician, or bad at whatever it is you're trying to do. Millie considered intolerance a virtue – intolerant of bad intonation, phrasing that wasn't thought out, bowing that didn't serve the piece. Nothing could be phoned in. Every note had a way of playing it and a reason for being. The students that stuck with her, the ones that absorbed what she had to offer and managed to negotiate the rough moments in their interaction with her, played with real musicianship and wisdom, taking listeners with them on the journey of a given piece. Whenever I hear a performance of certain staples of the cello repertoire – Beethoven's G Minor sonata, the Shostakovich Sonata, the Saint-Saens concerto – it frequently fails to be as compelling as the performances I heard played by Millie's students. There's a sense of aliveness that's missing, a sense of the significance of every note.

I think this might be attributable to something Millie and I had in common, perhaps the reason she recognized something in me as a kindred spirit and took me in. Millie and I both came to music of our own volition, with no encouragement from our parents. Music was, for both of us, an oasis, something we came to as a rebuke to our respective upbringings. The order and beauty of music represented a plane that we wanted to live our lives on; we wanted to model our worlds in emulation of music. Music saved both of our lives in a very real, concrete way.

In Millie's case, she had to deal, as a child, with a mother who openly hated her, and a father who did not do enough to protect Millie from her mother's animosity. She grew up in Chicago; her parents were non-observant radicals in a predominantly Orthodox neighborhood, and she felt like a loner and a misfit – her words – from an early age. She pretty much brought herself up, having realized that her parents were, in her words, compulsive liars. She skipped several grades, because she was an avid reader, and entered high school at the age of twelve; the age difference between her and her classmates compounded her sense of isolation and social awkwardness. She came to music through an assembly presentation at John Marshall High School. The conductor of her high school orchestra was none other than Merle J. Isaac (a familiar name to anyone who has played in a public school orchestra.) As Millie herself put it about that time of her life, "the only thing that ever gave me any happiness was music."

Merle J. Isaac became her first cello teacher. Her later teachers included Alice Lawrence (one of the first women to play with the Chicago Symphony), Luigi Silva (when she went to Yale) and Bernard Greenhouse, with whom she became a friend and pedagogical colleague. She worked briefly as a car mechanic (for an Army garage, her contribution to the war effort), and in the 1960s she ran The Tandem Record Store in New Haven while teaching at the Neighborhood Music School (where one of her students was Mark Churchill, who later became the Chair of New England Conservatory's Preparatory Department, and who cites Millie as a great influence in his own teaching.). She came to Berkeley in 1970 to become part of a storied cello community that also included Margaret

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Rowell and Colin Hampton. Rowell, who had been a member of the NBC orchestra under Toscanini, revolutionized cello teaching with a technique she developed when recovering from being bedridden with TB for a year – a technique that involved the whole body, in which the motion for the bow arm began in the lower back. Millie, who battled back problems her whole life, took this idea and ran with it; she even had experts in Tai Chi and Alexander Technique come and give workshops to her students. She did such amazing things out of that house.

Perhaps her greatest achievement was her weekly workshops. She thought that the term “master class” was too pretentious. She would hire an accompanist, and students would come and play for one another. Sometimes the performance was just that; sometimes it turned into a public lesson; sometimes it would serve as the impetus for a lively discussion about an aspect of the performance; sometimes a student would take on Millie's role and provide his or her own knowledge. Every workshop was different; you never knew what to expect. There was no time limit to individual performances, and everyone stayed on “stage” until they got what they came for: the feeling of what it was like to play through a piece in front of others, the chance to play with an accompanist, a bit of wisdom to guide them through the next week of practicing. To me, that epitomized the best kind of performance experience, in which process, result and community are completely intertwined; I can think of no better way to develop performance skills, or even to experience music.

Another great contribution was the “Cello Bash” (a term attributed to Robin Bonnell). I met Millie because I went, as a curious twelve-year-old, to the monthly meetings of the California Cello Club, in which Colin Hampton would conduct an orchestra of nearly a hundred cellists in his beautiful arrangements. The CCC kind of disintegrated in the mid-1970s, and Millie took up the slack by organizing her own mass cello concerts, involving kids, professionals, amateurs, college students, anyone with a cello. They became wildly popular and a highly anticipated event in the Bay Area every year. Millie wrote several of her own arrangements for these events, including a beautiful version of the Bach Double Concerto for an orchestra of cellos.

She really did this all herself. Yes, she had some help, but all these things ran on her energy, her vision, her view of the world, her idea that a student cannot learn properly outside the realm of a community, that it takes a village to raise a musician.

I feel so privileged to have been a part of that to the extent that I was. This is very difficult for me; as I mentioned, my time with her as a teenager was rough for both of us, and we were estranged for many years. I cannot claim to have a more privileged place in Millie's community than many other people. But the last couple of times I saw her were happy ones. She said to me “I was always afraid that I failed you, and I'm so happy with the way you turned out. I still consider you my son.” That statement means more to me than anything else I can think of.

I was out in California last week to spend some time with Millie before the death we all knew would come soon, and I'm so glad I did. I had an incomplete relationship with all three of my parents, but at least with Millie I got to say goodbye in a way that was fully acknowledged and loving.

What's so remarkable about her death is that it is what she wanted. After a confluence of ailments, the treatment of which would counteract each other, she made a very conscious decision to die, and she did so. This was not suicide, nor was it a specific event like a heart attack. It was sheer will, the same will with which she lived, the same will that she inspired so many others to conjure within themselves.