

My Mother's House of Abundance

My mother, Louise Hughes Rolling (B.1927-D.2015) was one of my life's treasures. I want her to be remembered for all that she was as a person, but especially for her hat making and fashion sense.

In the '50's, '60's and '70's we had a house of abundant love and precious possessions that represented fierce beliefs that were hard earned and coveted. We were a house of makers, crafters, and designers. My mother, "Miss Louise" was a Milliner with skills honed by careful study and voracious experimentation. Her "Singer" was a kind of sanctuary for her. While my father was in the basement working on some project made of leather and my grandmother sat at her treadle sewing machine perhaps fashioning her own winter coat, I can only imagine the flights of fancy my mother's designing mind must have taken. Based on some of the hats in this collection I am sure you can see an active imagination, a plethora of materials and a spirit of whimsy and fun. When I was a child, she would sometimes take me with her to the Garment District in New York City to shop for supplies. I gained a great appreciation for the color, texture, feel, sheen, and heft of fabric and other materials of construction. She was teaching me about possibilities of more than just the tools, she was also instructing me how each tool might be used. These were life lessons that she sneaked in before I was aware of what she meant. Those lessons deepened as I grew older. The closer and deeper you look, the more possibilities you can see in hat making and in life. These things were important!

Sanctioned by the internal and external scars from a history of deprivation initiated by societal discrimination, the outright and vocal hate from the larger society made us hold close to each other and the objects that we had created and accumulated as a family. As I look at and touch these items associated with my ancestors long gone, I realize why the "letting go" process has been difficult for me. I can feel these spirits, these bigger-than-life personalities. They fought so hard and so well to have the means to make what they needed to "cut a sharp figure" and to help family. With earned and learned practices from their ancestors, they were doing by fortitude "to make a way out of no way", to survive in a system built and designed to destroy them. I am finding it hard to let the physical evidence of their experiences disappear. I am given a small amount of peace by believing they would want me to let go of the physical and focus on the spiritual and the stories these things represent. We cannot bring back the past nor would I want to, but I do not want them and their efforts to be forgotten by the act of giving up the evidence of the work and study done to create their individual pieces of art and joy!

Upon reflection, I see that this indeed becomes part of my journey, my Bucket List, to carry forward the memory of them in word, deed, and story and look to the future with hope that a better world is coming, and to believe their “way out of no way” will not be forgotten.

Vicie A. Rolling, April 2023