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The Davis Enterprise Archives

Hilda Balukoff was anonymous — and extraordinary

By Joel Davis

Special to The Enterprise

Published: July 12, 2005

Hilda Balukoff, who died July 4 at age 92, was a saint of a woman, and not just because she had the daunting task of baby-sitting me for a decade when I was a kid in the 1960s and early 1970s. Though not a well-known Davis resident in the usual sense, she tops my list of favorite Davisites by a good margin.

On weekdays (and even a few weekends when our parents needed some alone time), **Hilda** took care of me and my sister, Tatia, in her modest L Street home from the time we were babies until we were preteens.

A short, pretty woman of German descent with a warm smile and friendly laugh, **Hilda** had several children and grandchildren of her own. She nevertheless always found time to make you feel special.

She did everything from to walk me to kindergarten on the first day of school to teach me how to make the number 5 ("the man turned around the corner and his hat flew off"). She taught me to stash my baseball cards in a safe place, and how to deal with teachers at Valley Oak Elementary School when I acted up.

She also gave me a hug when I rode a bike without training wheels for the first time. She subscribed to The Enterprise and encouraged us to read it, launching my interest in newspapers around the age of 6.

Hilda grew up poor with 11 siblings. She was resourceful, making toys out of scrap material, including butterfly nets for me each spring out of coat hangers and mesh cloth, and sewing custom-made clothes for my sister's Barbie dolls. She never forgot our birthdays and even sewed green elves' hats that she slipped my parents to put in the chimney one Christmas morning when we still believed in Santa Claus.

As I grew like a weed, she kept my bottomless tummy well-fed. She even poured the corn flakes out of the box into a mixing bowl so I could pluck out the prize before she carefully poured the cereal back in the box.

Hilda had but one rule: No turning the channel during "One Life to Live" or "General Hospital." She loved her soaps, perhaps because they were fraught with the problems she never seemed to have or could quietly resolve if she did.

I remember a lot of happy laughs and warm smiles from **Hilda**. Amazingly, I don't recall a single time she blew her cool. Despite the fact she was a devout Catholic, I have always looked back at her as the Buddha Babysitter, and am not surprised she died peacefully.

When my wife met **Hilda** the last time I saw her, in the mid-1990s, knowing my knack for finding trouble as a tot, she asked **Hilda**, "Was Joel a stinker?"

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Hilda simply smiled that beatific smile of hers and said nothing. (Thanks for holding your mud, **Hilda**.)

In short, **Hilda** Balukoff was our second mom. Our mom, who looked long and hard to find **Hilda** after we had a bad experience with a previous baby-sitter, was too busy running a household and holding down a career to bake, sew or cook fancy dishes. But **Hilda** did all those things amazingly well.

Hilda was not a hover-over-you helicopter sitter. Rather than fill the day with activity after activity, she gave us a long leash to learn things for ourselves, even if I often tested the length of that leash, including the time she came to fetch me after I wandered all the way past the East Davis Park determined to find a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow after a rainstorm.

She encouraged us to go outside and play, to learn things on our own, including interacting with the Arneson boys in the very-funky house next door on Alice Street, a house and street made famous by its famous owner, the late ceramicist Robert Arneson.

Unlike her famous neighbor, **Hilda** by choice lived a life of anonymity. But she was the best cook I ever knew, was an accomplished bowler, played a mean game of pinochle and loved gardening and growing things. She was especially good at growing kids.

If there is a heaven, somewhere **Hilda** Balukoff is there with her late gem of a husband, Pete, her rolling pin, sewing machine, bowling ball, dashboard Jesus and pinochle deck.

Not everyone in Davis who is extraordinary comes from the university. **Hilda** Balukoff, you see, came from the heart.

— Former Davis Enterprise staff writer Joel Davis is a Sacramento writer

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