

# A eulogy to “Uncle Annie,” the actress Patty Duke

**By nephew Mike Kennedy**

You have all known Patty Duke, Anna Pearce, Annamarie Duke, and Grandma Nana, her favorite role. Some of her grand-nieces and grand-nephews have only ever known her as “Uncle Annie”, because when our son Will was a toddler and couldn’t understand the linguistic concept of “Uncle Mike and Aunt Anna”, he decided their names were Uncle Mikey and Uncle Annie. From the moment she heard that she demanded we never correct him – she would be Uncle Annie and that was that.

You’ve heard or read many amazing stories in the last two weeks about Uncle Annie. Speaking for the extended family – whether they’ve traveled from afar or live here in town – it’s hard to express the depth of appreciation to all the people who have warmly honored this great lady. Articles, stories, obituaries, letters, Facebook comments, all written in a collective moment of grief for having lost her — but in deep appreciation that she lived.

And yet, among the countless thousands of laudatory words that have been written about her brilliant life and acting career, one thought struck me that among the people who are celebrating her – none of these people have ever seen Patty Duke play the role of Landlord.

Except me.

And I can report it didn’t go quite as well as the many other roles she played in her life.

It started when Anna and Mike brought her Mom, our grandma Frances Duke, to live near them to get her the help she needed after a lifetime on the east coast. Grandma lived in their house for a time, in a senior facility for a time, and then they bought her a lovely little house in downtown Coeur d’Alene. I moved to Coeur d’Alene around the same time and lived in Mike and Anna’s basement while I debated what the heck I was going to do with my life.

Grandma’s house was a tiny little slice of Americana, almost like a movie set right there on 11th and Front street. Grandma was so happy she even adopted a little yapping terrier from the pound and named him Bingo. Unfortunately those good times didn’t last. Just a month after moving in, Grandma’s health declined and she moved back into a place with more help for her.

Enter the nephew, who could now have a place of his own.

I moved out of the Uncles’ downstairs bedroom, took charge of the rental lease and the dog Bingo, and converted that lovely little house into the Mike Kennedy swingin’ bachelor pad.

It was a good thing that I had recently fallen in love with the beautiful Kathleen Morrow because in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho in 1991, the chances that a single, slightly paunchy young man walking a 10-pound terrier named Bingo would ever get a date were extraordinarily slim.

I was working a lot so I installed a doggy door that allowed the cute little creature to go outside while I was gone. He was housebroken, mostly, but he was so sensitive to cold that instead of using the dog door and shivering through our Idaho winter, this little terrier would shun the snow, and instead go down into the now unoccupied basement to do his business.

Who cared, right? No one went into the basement, and I'd get to it at some point.

Fast forward a year. Kathleen and I were engaged. Our wedding week arrived, and my bachelor party, co-planned by none other than Uncle Mikey himself, was held at the little house on Front Street.

The next morning after the Bachelor Party I was vaguely aware of a knock on the door. It was my landlord and her sister (my mother) coming by to check on the house and help straighten up before family guests arrived. When I didn't answer, they entered the house using the landlord's key.

This was not part of my wedding week plan.

My best man Dave Smith was staying with me from Texas. He and I were jolted awake still suffering from the last evening. And making it worse, my aunt and my mother were about to witness the last gasps of my bachelorhood, which consisted of several empty cases of Rainier Beer cans and a literal three weeks' worth of unwashed dishes in the moldy kitchen sink.

I have never heard such a shriek of horror in my life, not from my aunt, and certainly never from a landlord. I was now face to face with both these phenomena in the person of a four foot eleven inch angry ball of housekeeping rage. And instead of taking my side, my mother (her sister) lined up behind my landlord waiting her turn to take the next big chunk out of my hide.

As I tried to apologize and tell them it was going to be okay, I heard Anna tell my Mom "Carol, we have to wash all the sheets and towels! I will get them started in the washing machine."

Which, you guessed it, was in the basement.

I grabbed Dave and brought him up to speed on the problem I knew was awaiting downstairs. We had to get down there before Anna did, and I needed his help. So I distracted my aunt and my mother while Dave headed down to frantically destroy the evidence. I don't know if he used a leaf blower or a flamethrower but somehow he miraculously cleared every last ancient turd out of that basement.

A year or so later I went back to our college homecoming in Texas, and Dave and I reminisced about the wedding. He told this story to a group of our friends. Dave said, "The thing I'll never forget is being hungover with Kennedy in the basement of his house, getting rid of piles of dried dog poop while an Academy Award winning actress screamed at him from the kitchen upstairs. That was memorable."

Not for me, Dave. Not for me.

Fortunately, Uncle Annie was able to laugh at this later. In this particular case, much later, but she did laugh about it – there was always room for humor in her world.

Last week I met Uncle Mikey to discuss the funeral.

He reminded me of a story that I'd heard her tell before. Not long after she published her book "Call Me Anna" she went on one of her first speaking engagements on the topic of mental health. Before she spoke, she received a letter that she read to Mike through tears. The writer was the first person to say the words that would become commonplace over the years: "You saved my life."

The young woman had been staying in a psychiatric institution because she was profoundly depressed and hadn't spoken words in a long time, to the point that doctors were concerned she was losing touch. By coincidence, the TV was on the Phil Donahue show, and his guest that day was Patty Duke. At the end of the interview the girl finally spoke to the medical staff and said "that's my story. That lady is saying exactly what I feel." The young woman went on to get diagnosed, get the right prescriptions and the right medical care, and was back on the road to a productive life.

Anna's response was classically her - empathy and competitiveness. She had always said "If I could just help one person figure this out, it will all have been worth it." After reading that letter she said: "There's my one. We did it – we got help for our one. Now I want to get the rest of them!!!"

If I hadn't moved to Idaho and lived near them for all the years I did, I would have been skeptical about how commonplace these comments were. But it would only take one casual stroll through the Kootenai County Fair with Uncle Annie and Uncle Mikey to see the love and appreciation so many people had for her and the impact she had on their lives.

Their dog's vets, the florists, cashiers at the grocery store, the neighbors in the different homes they lived in, the staff at Denny's, the letter carriers who brought the endless mail to their house — all of these people could recount a positive impact she had on their lives. But what many don't know is how profoundly and beautifully each one of them, each one of you, also affected her.

So on behalf of the family she loved, on behalf of the friends she loved, we want to thank you all for your outpouring of love and affection.

We also want to thank all the marvelous pastors here at Lake City Church. Pastor Mike, Pastor Tod, Pastor Mark – we are humbled by how much you and your congregation have done to help through this difficult time.

To Pastor Mike Grabenstein – you've seen Mike and Anna through some tough times, and some very good times, too. Thank you for your beautiful words and your spirit.

And to the people of Coeur d'Alene and North Idaho, from the bottom of this family's heart, thank you for welcoming, accepting, celebrating, and loving Patty Duke, and ultimately, in her most contented and happy years, thank you for simply calling her Anna.

I want to finish with a brief story that I hope sums what I think a lot of us are feeling today.

Uncle Annie was pretty familiar with the folks at Kootenai Health over the last few years, and while that often signals hard times, in her case it began some special relationships she treasured.

She had this old school perception that she thought doctors wanted to keep up a firm wall of professionalism and not get too close to their patients. She decided that one of her goals would be to get the docs to break and show real affection. So at the end of her appointments she started saying to them "I love you". Sometimes this was a little strange or unexpected to these doctors, but she kept it up. One of Mike's clearest memories during the last year was when she finally got one of the docs to lean back over and whisper "I love you too!"

Her enthusiasm on breaking down that wall made her almost as giddy as a schoolgirl. She'd again gotten her one, and now she wanted to get the rest!

I think that's how most of us feel today. We all know she loved us. That was her incredible gift. But today is our day to tell the world, "Anna - we love you too!"

I certainly did.