

Cat's Eulogy – Lee Harrop

I first met Catherine in 2009 at Perkins+Will's old office at the corner of Peachtree and 17th. The company she was working for at the time had been hired to do the civil engineering component of the BeltLine's Corridor Design and Eastside Trail. She walked into the conference room and I immediately knew we'd be good friends.

I've been replaying that scene in my mind trying to figure how I knew she and I would hit off. It could've been her striking red hair – I come from a family of redheads – or it could've been her aura of confidence, but I'm pretty sure it was her amazing boots which unapologetically added several inches to her already statuesque height and seemed to challenge anyone in the room to question her.

We quickly became fast friends with me calling her Lucy and her calling me Ethel. And I was right about the boots and should've listened to them...over the years I only questioned her a handful of times and more often than not, she was right.

Recently it has come to my attention that she downplayed her accomplishments to her family. During a recent phone call with BJ after he had read some of the wonderful things that had been written about his sister, he told me that he didn't realize how integral Catherine was to the BeltLine and its success (and so many other things).

I wasn't surprised to hear that Catherine took the modest "it was a team effort" approach with her family...she never was one to toot her own horn. I, on the other hand, am more than happy to toot on her behalf and would like to take this moment to set history straight.

To her family, particularly to Graham and Amelia Catherine, and with sincere apologies to your parents the Reverends Owens, I'm here to tell you that your Aunt Catherine was a bad ass.

Much of what you're seeing today along the BeltLine wouldn't be here

(it certainly wouldn't be as awesome)

had it not been for her. I hope you get a chance to talk with some of the people here...we all have stories about what an incredibly talented, compassionate, and loving woman Catherine was.

But for now, you're stuck with me. I've pulled together three of my best Cat stories to share. I do so knowing that if the roles were reversed she would do the same AND she'd do it better than I'm about to.

Phoenix in Chicago

Catherine and I had several opportunities to travel to Chicago together for work. It was one of her favorite cities because of its amazing architecture. Every trip she'd be ready with a list of restaurants for us to try or a new tour she'd been wanting to go on. Chicago was always more fun with Catherine.

In 2015 she and I went to Chicago to attend the National Brownfields Conference where the Atlanta BeltLine's Eastside Trail and Historic Fourth Ward Park were up for a prestigious Phoenix Award which is kinda like an Oscar, but for environmental cleanup.

So we're in Chicago and we get a message that Mayor Reed has sent someone to accept the award on the City's behalf. I was mildly irate to hear that a bureaucrat who was not involved in either project would be walking up on the stage instead of me and Cat. She, on the other hand, quickly passed "mildly" irate and appeared to be bordering on a ginger snap (she never had a good poker face).

As we got settled in the audience, we looked around to try to identify the offending bureaucrat but didn't see anyone we recognized. When the BeltLine's name was announced, we saw a small, frail man totter up to the stage to accept the award. Reed had sent a member of City Council...possibly the only member of City Council who wasn't a fan of the BeltLine. I glanced out of the corner of my eye to gauge the shade of redness of Catherine's face, but she was just smiling and clapping with no hint of disappointment.

She couldn't have been more gracious to the Councilman, shaking his hand and standing next to him in the photos. After the ceremony, he unceremoniously handed us the award and left to immediately return to Atlanta.

I later asked her what was going through her mind that evening, and she said something to the effect of "you and I are going to be presented with a lot of awards over the years....he needed this now more than we did."

She was a classy bad ass.

A Visit from Father Brother

Back in 2013, when Cat and Nate were living in a little condo on Ardmore Place, she decided that they would host the Owens family Thanksgiving. As luck would have it, I had plans to visit my family in South Carolina, so I offered my house for Catherine's brother and his family to stay in. I figured that my house had space to fit his family comfortably, and I knew that her brother and his wife were both ministers (I always referred to him as Father Brother when talking with Cat) so I knew my house would be in good hands. After reassuring her that using the house would not reflect poorly on her annual review, she accepted my offer.

When I got back to Atlanta after Thanksgiving my house was cleaner than I left it. I looked everywhere for something to tease her about. I remember texting her saying that Father Brother's family were like Episcopal ninjas...in and out with no trace left behind.

The next morning as I was getting my coffee, I saw it: one of my domestic Starbucks mugs was on the international Starbucks mug shelf. Proof that they had actually stayed there.

Naturally I immediately called Catherine with a grim voice, saying how disappointed I was in the state of the house. I probably led her on for 3 minutes before telling her about the crime against my OCD mug storage. After a few quiet seconds she let out a welp...I wasn't sure if she was laughing or crying. Turns out she was laughing.

It wasn't until a few months ago that she finally told me the full story. After Father Brother and his family left (and they did leave the house clean), she came over and cleaned in what can only be described as a CIA-level of intensity. In doing so, she found a pair of someone's underwear among the clean sheets in the dryer. We had a good laugh about it, but she told me that at the time she felt like she had dodged a bullet. When it came to taking care of her family and friends, she was a bad ass.

Who Gardens in a Skirt?

In the first quarter of 2018 I had two major life-events, both of which Catherine had a hand in.

The first was the long-awaited completion of my home renovation (15+ years in the making) which couldn't have happened without the impeccable design from and collaboration with Nathan. I attribute the success of our collaboration to Catherine who had spent years training her husband, an architect, on how to work well with civil engineers.

(Pause for awkward laughs from architects and engineers.)

The second event was on March 25th, about three weeks after I left the Atlanta BeltLine. I had always planned on landscaping my side yard once the house renovation was done, and Kevin Burke talked me into throwing a landscaping brunch. The premise was simple: invite a bunch of friends, give them a few mimosas and bloody marys, and have them each plant a shrub or two.

The night before the brunch it poured rain for hours which left my side yard (which I had diligently stripped of grass and vegetation) a muddy mess. Undeterred, a small army of friends, many of whom are here today, descended on that muddy mess and planted 62 shrubs and 2 trees in less than two hours.

But only one of them did it while wearing a skirt. Not only did Catherine plant at least 4 shrubs in a skirt, but she uncovered a small sinkhole where a large tulip poplar had once stood.

(And of course it would be Catherine who would find that...and she would scold me for using the phrase "sinkhole" for what was clearly just a void.)

She was digging a hole for a dwarf loropetalum when her shovel slipped out of her hands, leaving just the top two-feet visible above grade. She straightened up, took a moment, turned around looking at me and said "I got this, boss". And sure enough, by the time the last shrub was in the ground she had filled and compacted the void masquerading as a sinkhole.

In a freaking skirt. She was a bad ass like that.

It was no surprise that our friendship transcended being co-workers. After I left the BeltLine she continued to be one of my biggest cheerleaders as I was for her. The fact that she regularly referred to me as “boss” after we stopped working together was incredibly endearing even though it drove me crazy.

As with most friends, we didn’t see one another as often as we’d like, but when we did we were always able to pick right up where we left off. I’m gonna miss those times together – and especially that infectious laughter that always made everyone around her smile.

I’d like to close by thanking everyone who has reached out over the last few weeks during which time I’ve unofficially earned the nickname “the NateKeeper”. I’ve told him and the family about the number of people who have reached out with stories of how Catherine left an impression on them and that the family has a small army at their back to support them.

I think its safe to say that Catherine would be very embarrassed, very humbled and very grateful at this outpouring of love and support.

Lee Harrop