

SUNDAY
FEBRUARY 1, 2015



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Lunch with Gwennie Todd

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL
MESSENGER FOOD COLUMNIST

The walls of Anna Laura Todd's beautiful little home hold sweet memories of her. Sometimes, Anna Laura's daughter, Gwen, or "Gwennie," to all who know and love her, hears the ring of her mother's footsteps in the click of her own heels against the hard wood floors. The cocoa-rich aroma of brownies baking in the kitchen ushers in visions of Anna Laura measuring and stirring.

I met with Gwennie a couple of weeks ago at the end of our brief January thaw. Parking along the curb at Anna Laura's, now Gwennie's house in Earlington, I entered through the screened porch as my good friend, Pam Wheat had instructed. I was immediately greeted by Pam, Gwennie, and the appetizing fragrance of Bigos, a rich and meaty Polish hunter's stew.

As Gwennie busied herself preparing our lunch, Pam quickly escorted me through house until we came to a little room off of the kitchen. Above the doorway was a painted sign that read, "The Sweet Room." This was Anna Laura's room.

A Life Changing Encounter

While looking around this beautiful little room filled with books and keepsakes, I learned that as a freshman at Western Kentucky University, Gwennie had hoped to become a pharmacist. But in an encounter which would change her life forever, a dear lady who worked for Campus Crusade introduced her to Christ. Afterward, Gwennie's goal was to become a missionary and to share Christ with others, wherever the path might lead her. Even if took her thousands of miles away from her sweet mother, and all that she had ever known.

First, that path led to Springfield, Mass. From there, Gwennie headed to the mountain camps of southern Poland, which was under Communist rule at the time. Although Gwennie was there legitimately as a student, her work as a missionary was conducted covertly and could have led to severe consequences if discovered.

Two years into her work in Europe, Gwennie's father, James "Toebaby" Todd died of a sudden heart attack. Gwennie made the exhausting trip home, unsure of her future in the mission field. After the funeral, newly widowed Anna Laura shared some wise words with her daughter. She said that lots of folks would expect Gwennie to give up her missionary work and come home now that her mother was alone. In her own powerful expression of faith, Anna Laura reassured Gwennie that she would be just fine there in Earlington, in the house that James had built for her. As Gwennie puts it, her mother "held her children with an open hand," and "just let God be God."

Just Mama and Me

After her father's death, Gwennie continued her work in Poland and then in Austria, for 22 more years. Eventually, though, the path led right back to her mother's door. Anna Laura's health was beginning to fail, and her life expectancy was about two more years. With her two brothers having also passed, only Gwennie was left to care for her Anna Laura. She arranged to work part time from her mother's house for Global Media Outreach, one of the partners of Campus Crusade, now called simply "Cru," and headed home.

Those two years turned into 11, enough time for Gwennie and Anna Laura make up for all of the years apart. With this gift of time, the women entertained friends, shared stories and



Laura Hunt Angel photo

Bigos, a hearty hunter's stew, is Polish comfort food at its best.



Laura Hunt Angel photo

Cru missionary Gwen Todd, better known as "Gwennie," relaxes at home with a bowl of bigos.

prepared meals from both Anna Laura's recipes as well as Gwennie's international collection. For Anna Laura, no meal was complete without a little piece of chocolate, even if a regular dessert was served. Her love of chocolate was such that Gwennie began throwing her mother chocolate birthday parties, which were especially favored by younger guests of the Todd family, who would go home with their pockets stuffed with chocolates.

As the years went by, Anna Laura's world grew gradually smaller and smaller, until finally, it was confined to the room that I now stood in. Anna Laura quietly passed in "The Sweet Room," in 2013.

Cooking With Gwennie

Pam and I are looking around the room at all of the books when Gwennie approaches from behind with a package of Indian naan bread in her hand to go with our Bigos. She says that she would like to show me how to make "Mama's brownies," which can bake while we eat our stew and talk some more.

As she melts chocolate,

then stirs in the sugar and other ingredients, the gloomy weather outside is all but forgotten, replaced by the warm, rich flavors of our bigos and the sweet aroma of chocolate. Gwennie says that for many years the family suspected that her mother had intentionally left something out of the ingredient list for her brownies, because no one else could quite duplicate their fudgy goodness.

As we talk, it becomes obvious that Gwennie's faith is an integral, inseparable part of her. Our conversation revolves around recipes, family stories and work, and bounces between cultures and eras, but always it is sprinkled with scripture, snatches of hymns and stories of how Christ has touched her life and the lives of those around her through her years of service.

About a year ago, Gwennie sat on the porch of her mother's home, now her own, waiting for a truck to deliver the things that she had collected in her years of mission work, but left in Vienna when she came home to care for her mother. As she sat there, the layers of



Laura Hunt Angel

Anna Laura's brownies will please chocolate lovers of all ages.

time began to peel away, and she remembered another day, many years ago, when she sat in the same spot and wondered what awaited her, out there in the wide world beyond her mother's porch.

Now, life has come full circle and the world is coming to Gwennie, through her work with Cru on the staff of Bridges International at Western. Part of Gwennie's ministry includes cooking for her group of international students, and she is offering others the opportunity to prepare baked desserts for them. Interested bakers who would like provide cookies, cakes and other sweet treats for Gwennie's girls at Western can contact her at gwenatodd@aol.com.

Oh, and the secret to Anna Laura's brownies? In one of several letters left to family members to read after her passing, Anna Laura revealed with sweetness and humor that the missing ingredient was Love.

The Recipes

You wouldn't think that the combination of meats, sauerkraut and spices in Gwennie's Bigos would go with the pure chocolate intensity of Anna Laura's brownies, but believe me, it does. I'm certain that Anna Laura would agree that anything goes with chocolate.

Bigos (Polish Hunter's Stew)

This stew is traditionally made out of ingredients readily available in an ordinary Polish kitchen. Gwennie amended her batch by adding some chicken and smoked ham that she had in the fridge. I estimate this will make 10 - 12 hearty servings.

2 thick slices hickory smoked bacon
1 pound kielbasa, sliced into 1/2-inch pieces
1 pound cubed pork
1/4 cup plain flour
3 cloves garlic, chopped

1 onion, diced
2 carrots, diced
1 1/2 cups sliced fresh mushrooms
4 cups shredded green cabbage
1 16-ounce jar sauerkraut, rinsed and well drained
1/4 cup dry red wine
1 bay leaf
1 teaspoon each dried basil, marjoram and sweet paprika
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon black pepper and caraway seed
1 pinch cayenne
1/2 ounce dried mushrooms
1 dash each hot pepper sauce and Worcestershire
5 cups beef stock
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1 cup canned diced tomatoes

Dice the bacon and fry until crisp. Add the bacon and rendered fat to a slow cooker along with the remaining ingredients and cook on low for 10-12 hours or overnight. Remove bay leaf before serving.

Anna Laura's Brownies

Through a bit of trial and error, Gwennie learned that the icing for these brownies turned out better when made with water instead of milk. This recipe has been adjusted accordingly, as has the baking temperature and time. These are best served warm.

1 cup sugar
2 eggs, well beaten
2 squares unsweetened baking chocolate
2/3 cup flour
5 tablespoons butter, melted
1 teaspoon vanilla
1/2 cup chopped nuts (Anna Laura used English walnuts)

Combine the melted butter with the eggs, then add the sugar and flour. Melt the chocolate over a double boiler and add to the mixture along with the nuts. Pour the batter into an 11x7 pan. Bake at 325 degrees for about 25 minutes. Watch carefully so that the edges do not begin to harden.

For the icing: Melt 2 squares of unsweetened baking chocolate and 3 tablespoons of butter in a double boiler. Remove from heat and add 1 1/2 cups powdered sugar, 1 teaspoon vanilla and about 2 tablespoons of the hot water from the double boiler. Stir well and spread over warm brownies. About 9 brownies.