



**Gift to Erie:
The Story of Denise Illig
Robison Mullen**

*By Mary Ann Frew and
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Before it was commonplace for young women to do so, Denise Illig danced to the tune of her own drum. Influenced and supported by strong, forward-thinking parents, she spoke her mind and charted her own course. As a political powerhouse in the making who would go on to diffuse the idea of choosing between family and career, Denise Robison Mullen was a trailblazer at local and state levels. At the beginning, though, she describes her childhood as “charmed.” She grew up in Erie’s central core on West 10th Street in a big, comfortable home spacious enough for a large family, which included five children: her three brothers, William, James, and Joseph, and sister, Mary Virginia.

It was a short walk from home to work for her father, attorney William Illig, a Georgetown Law graduate who had a large office just a few blocks away at West Eighth and Peach streets. Her mother, Mary Cleary Illig, was entirely focused on raising her family and providing them with a Catholic education. They attended Catholic grade schools and faithfully attended Mass at St. Peter Cathedral.

Although Denise began her formal education as a kindergartener at Longfellow School just a few blocks away, Denise’s mother decided that it was essential for her daughter to have a Catholic experience and transferred her to Villa Maria when it was at West Eighth and Liberty streets. Denise was at Villa for 12 years.



THE MASONIC BUILDING WHERE WILLIAM ILLIG’S OFFICES WERE LOCATED



THE ORIGINAL VILLA MARIA CAMPUS AT WEST EIGHTH AND LIBERTY STREETS WAS DENISE'S EARLY ACADEMIC HOME.

College Days



A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE OF MANHATTANVILLE COLLEGE (NOW UNIVERSITY)

An excellent student, there was never a doubt about Denise going to college. But where was a young, devoutly Catholic woman to go to college in 1957? Especially if she intended to attend a women's Catholic institution. Together, Denise and her parents explored the options. The premier Catholic women's college in those days was Manhattanville

College of the Sacred Heart in Purchase, New York, just a short commute or train ride from New York City. Trinity College in Washington, D.C., was a close second choice, but in the end, the power and sophistication of Manhattanville won out. More importantly, it was the overwhelming choice of Denise's mother.

Manhattanville College was originally a traditional women's boarding and finishing school called the Academy of the Sacred Heart. Located in New York's Lower Manhattan, it was founded by the Sisters of the Sacred

Heart. Their new college opened in Manhattan but was squeezed out of its campus home when City College of New York (CCNY) used the process of eminent domain to expand its rapidly growing college by forcing out Manhattanville. Manhattanville moved north into Westchester and the small town of Purchase where it took over the Whitelaw Reed estate, a sprawling 100-acre farm property with several stately old buildings.

The power of Manhattanville is best described by listing some of its graduates. Early on, the college had become a favorite of the Kennedy family, which later dedicated a gymnasium and other buildings. Numerous Kennedy women attended and graduated Manhattanville, including Rose Kennedy (mother of JFK), Maria Schriver (first lady of California), Eunice Kennedy Schriver (founder of the Special Olympics), Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith, and Ethel Kennedy (RFK's widow). Other notable alumna include Gloria Vanderbilt, actress Rosemary Murphy, CNN anchor Kitty Pilgrim, New Jersey Mayor Barbara Boggs Sigmund, novelist Patricia Neil Warber, and children's book author Sook Nyui Choi.

At Manhattanville, Denise met the four-year roommate who was to become her very best lifetime friend, Ann Cunningham. Denise became a four-year member and the chairwoman of the school's "dance committee." Dance committees were an odd artifact of 1950s-era women's colleges. Their work involved recruiting "boys" from neighboring colleges and universities to attend school dances. Duties included the logistics of advertising the dances, arranging for transportation, and then hosting as young men arrived at the events. Her work on the dance committee introduced her to two young women who would eventually become important professional contacts and later helped her find jobs: (1) Barbara Boggs, daughter of Hale Boggs, United States Senate majority whip, and (2) Joan Bennett, who eventually married Ted Kennedy.

Early Professional Career



RIDING IN CENTRAL PARK

After graduation and a typical-for-Manhattanville two-month summer tour of Europe, Denise took a position in New York City as counselor and adviser to international students pursuing education in the United States. She was assigned the state of Wisconsin as a territory and given more than 100 visiting students to supervise. Her European experience provided

the insight to relate to the international students who had been sequestered in various midwestern educational institutions. Long before the modern and convenient age of email and the internet, Denise was required to stay in touch with her Wisconsin charges through traditional methods: phone calls and letters. In addition to dealing directly with the international students, themselves, and their ongoing issues, Denise and her colleagues stayed in touch with parents and host families as well as the educational institutions where they attended classes.

Denise loved living in Manhattan. It reminded her of her college days and helped her remain in touch with the powerful network of alumna friends she had met during her college days. She had been introduced to horseback riding when she was a student. Manhattanville, like many women's colleges, featured an equestrian program housed in the barn of the former farm that had become its Westchester campus. When she was living in New York, Denise learned that it was possible to rent carriage horses from the Central Park Stables, which she did regularly, riding through the park on weekends. After a year, however, Denise had the feeling that she was missing "something," and that she might find it in Washington, D.C. Manhattanville had a strong alumnae network in Washington, D.C., as well as New York City, so Denise applied for and found a government job in Washington, D.C., as a caseworker.

Ambitious and skillful, Denise quickly worked her way up the ladder and became a congressional aide to Sen. Ted Kennedy. Kennedy had a huge congressional staff when Denise arrived because he was in the middle of a reelection campaign. In June 1964, Kennedy was in Massachusetts stumping when the small airplane he used to move between campaign stops was caught in a sudden local storm. The pilot attempted to make an instrument landing at a small airfield but crashed into a group of trees a few miles from the landing site. That accident was just one of several tragic events in the life of Ted Kennedy. It was just a few months after his brother, JFK, had been assassinated. The Kennedy plane crash propelled a long series of discussions about the Kennedy family “fate.” Two people were killed in the airplane crash, and Ted Kennedy suffered a broken back and was hospitalized for months. His survival was in question for several weeks.

In Washington, Ted Kennedy’s office responded to the emergency by immediately relocating many of the most essential staff members to Massachusetts so they could be close to the senator and continue campaigning for him. A skeleton crew was left in Washington, D.C., where Denise was placed in charge of the office. The Kennedy crash altered Denise’s life forever. One day in the office, as she was rushing about, answering phones, visiting vacant desks, and trying to keep up with the chaos that had descended there after the crash in Massachusetts, her leg became tangled in a wire and she fell, violently striking her head. She tried to remain at her post, bravely ignoring the large bump and the bleeding, but staff members took her to a hospital where it was determined that she had suffered a concussion. It was decided, against her will, that Denise should return to Erie to recover.



*EXPERTS NOTED THAT IT WAS A MIRACLE
THAT ANYONE SURVIVED THE KENNEDY
PLANE CRASH.*

A few days later, Denise was resting at her home on West 10th Street when the doorbell rang, and Russell “Robbie” Robison entered to chat with her father. Robbie had been working in Pennsylvania for an oil company at the time and was about to transition into owning a set of local Red Barn restaurants in Erie. In anticipation of his move to Erie, Robbie, who was a scratch golfer, was visiting with William Illig to ask about joining the Kahkwa Club and its premier golf course. He had determined that membership to such a club would help him to make important local business contacts. When Denise and Robbie met at the Illig home, there were sparks. And after a brief introduction, the two decided to meet in Washington, D.C., at a later date.

Enter Russell ‘Robbie’ Robison



ROBBIE ROBISON

Robbie Robison was born in California and went to Stanford University, where he earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in petroleum engineering. After graduation, he became an officer in the United States Air Force, serving as a test pilot and aircraft engineer. Robbie flew F-104s, F-106s, B-52s, and B-58s. He was also a weapons specialist. After his discharge from the Air Force, he entered the petroleum industry working in New Orleans, Chicago, and Pittsburgh. He eventually concluded that he did not like the oil exploration and drilling businesses and decided to open a franchise business. His time in Pittsburgh had alerted him to the tremendous business opportunities in Erie, which according to everyone he met, was the favorite summer and vacation destination for everyone in southwestern Pennsylvania. And his years serving at Wright Patterson Air Force Station alerted him to a new and exciting restaurant franchise, Red Barn, which was headquartered in Ohio.

Robbie's entrepreneurial plan was to open a Red Barn franchise in Erie. Red Barn's system was growing rapidly at the time, and there were no outlets in the Erie area. Based on the number of tourists who visited Erie each summer, he knew that a convenient fast food outlet that served more than basic hamburgers and French fries would be a winner, and he signed on with the Ohio franchise. Franchise owners were promised training in location selection, staff recruitment, and fast food restaurant operation.

Robbie was busy choosing locations for the four Erie outlets that he planned to open, closing on those properties, and arranging with franchise headquarters to have the new restaurants built. He selected a set of locations that would capture the lucrative tourist trade as well as a steady stream of local business. There was also the problem of coordinating with the builders and recruiting staff members. While he was busy settling into his new ownership role in Erie, there was a critical matter that he had been putting off. Putting off for too long. When he had stopped at the Illig home, Robbie Robison had agreed to meet the amazing woman that he had met on one of his early trips to Erie: Denise Illig, who was working in Washington, D.C.



*THE RED BARN MENU
WAS UNIQUE AMONG
FAST FOOD OUTLETS.*

Almost a year had gone by when Robbie finally made it to Washington, D.C., to see Denise. He had been consumed with the details of designing his new life in Erie as well as opening four new restaurant locations. By that time, Denise had risen to the position of Ted Kennedy's press secretary and seemed well on her way toward a high-level political career. But she and Robbie began dating, and their long-distance romance inspired Denise to reconsider her life goals. She had been on a fast track toward a career in politics, but she realized that if she and Robbie were to get married, that he would not be able to leave Erie at such a critical time for his new business.

Career Versus Family and Marriage

In April 1966, the New York Times featured an announcement from the parents of a stunning Eastern couple: “Robbie Robinson, a test pilot and businessman whose family was from Bakersfield, California, and Denise Illig, Ted Kennedy press secretary whose family was from Erie, Pennsylvania, were engaged to be married.” It was big news both in New York and in Washington, D.C.

But it was the 1960s, long before the Women’s Movement. Most social observers at the time were convinced that a woman should choose between a career and a traditional family life. Facing that complicated decision, Denise Illig decided that she could do both. Her decision was influenced by her love for her hometown as well as her confidence that she would be able to raise a family and then return to the world of professional politics. And she did so.

After a whirlwind, nine-month romance, Denise and Robbie were married and moved into a modest duplex home on West Sixth Street in Erie. They had five children in a little more than five years, the same number of siblings that had grown up in the William Illig family on West 10th Street. They eventually moved from the duplex where they had begun their Erie lives and into a large family home on South Shore Drive. There, they nurtured their five children: Mary Arden, Denise, Pamela, Russell Jr., and Matthew.

Career 2.0

While children are never completely “raised,” as soon as Denise was confident that hers had been given a good start, she resumed her career and began to search for a pathway way back into politics. With three of the children off to college and the last two ready to graduate from high school, she took a position working for U.S. Rep. Marc Lincoln Marks in his local office. Marks had defeated longtime incumbent Joe Vigorito in

the 1976 election for Congress and he needed to build an office to serve the 24th congressional district. When the 24th District was eliminated in a redistricting in 1980, Denise took a job at Erie Insurance in strategic planning and corporate development. It was a good job, but it had removed her from her first love, politics. She was indirectly connected when her husband, Robbie, was elected the first Erie County executive in 1978 and served until 1982. But her own reentry did not occur until 1989 when she designed a brilliant campaign for Erie City Council, launched it herself, and became the first Republican to win the post since the early 1960s.



WHEN ERIE'S TOM RIDGE WAS ELECTED GOVERNOR OF PENNSYLVANIA, ONE OF HIS FIRST ACTIONS WAS TO BRING LOCAL TALENT TO HARRISBURG.

Erie. She was reelected to her seat on Erie City Council in 1993 and continued until newly elected Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Ridge appointed her to the position of deputy secretary of aging in 1995.

Denise remained active in the community before and after her return to the work world, and her community involvement accelerated during her years on City Council. Among her most notable contributions, she served as a member of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC), was a champion for the U.S. Brig Niagara and Maritime Museum, a member of the Port Authority, a member of the Water Authority when it was established, a board member at Gannon University, and an all-around champion for waterfront development. She was also a leading member of Mayor Joyce Savocchio's transition team. Along with Savocchio and longtime County Executive Judy Lynch, Denise was instrumental in the process of modernizing and improving

Deputy Secretary of Aging

The Pennsylvania Department of Aging was a critical department and Gov. Ridge fully understood the importance of the work that it needed to do. Pennsylvania was one of the oldest states demographically in the country at the time, and rural areas of the state were in particular need. There had been countless instances of elder abuse, improper nutrition, substandard housing, and other embarrassments prior to his election. To solve this problem, he appointed a long-time former Erie resident, Richard Browdie, to the post of secretary and Denise Robison as deputy secretary. Browdie's Harrisburg organization included the ongoing staff and its new two-person executive leadership. Denise was the only deputy secretary and served as Browdie's operations director as he began to lead the state network of 65 distinct Area Agency on Aging (AAA) operations. Browdie had been director of Erie's AAA and knew the "ins and outs" of urban settings, but his primary problem was in rural parts of the state, and that became Denise's portfolio. Browdie was also less comfortable with small group interactions, a skill that Denise had demonstrated in her previous work.



*RICHARD BROWDIE,
PENNSYLVANIA SECRETARY
OF AGING AND A GANNON
UNIVERSITY MBA
GRADUATE*

With her children almost fully launched (two were still living at home, but they had completed their education and were working), Denise reluctantly moved to Harrisburg, where she moved into a townhouse in the "Shipoke Neighborhood" within a few blocks of the State Capitol and adjacent to the Susquehanna River. Several factors made her new commuting life bearable. First, she would take advantage of assignments to visit rural AAA's on many Fridays and Mondays by stopping on her way back and forth to Erie. Denise would leave work on a Friday morning, visit a rural AAA between Harrisburg and Erie, and then continue to her

home. Second, Robbie's new position as a salesperson for Griggs Steel had assigned him a territory that included Harrisburg, so on many of the potentially lonely weekends where she might have been alone, he was able to join her.

Always adaptable, Denise purchased a CB Radio and began to communicate with the truckers on Interstate 80 as she was traveling. She laughingly describes the ways in which so many benevolent big rig drivers adopted her as she traveled the interstate, advising her of road conditions and protecting her by having her file in between two guardian big rigs. They would chat with her, ask her how fast she wanted to drive, and generally run interference, making her commute fun, interesting, and safe.



*DENISE ILLIG ROBISON'S
RIVERSIDE SHIPOKE
NEIGHBORHOOD*

During her early days in Harrisburg, Denise was asked to attend a weeklong conference on a newly identified disease that was impacting elderly people, Alzheimer's. Diving into the new area with her characteristic enthusiasm, she soon became the state government's expert and developed resources and programs in all of her AAA organizations, where she recognized the disorder as a growing problem.

Even with its attendant difficulties and travel, Denise loved her Harrisburg job and would have stayed longer, but when Gov. Ridge left for Washington, D.C., and the job of Homeland Security director, she and Browdie decided that it would be best to move on. Browdie became chief executive of the Benjamin Rose nonprofit in Cleveland, Ohio.

Denise returned to her home in Erie and began to consider reentering politics.

County Executive Run

With her Harrisburg experience behind her, Denise decided to make another run for elected office in Erie. In 2001, she crafted a campaign for the Republican nomination for Erie County executive, a position that she would have been well-equipped to fill. Her history of local volunteer work, two Erie City Council terms, and time in Harrisburg positioned her as a highly qualified candidate. She designed a solid campaign and worked hard to be elected, but local circumstances in combination with a third candidate who entered the race squeezed her out. Rick Schenker, a former spokesman for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, won the nomination and went on to upset incumbent Judy Lynch. He served as county executive from 2002 to 2006.

The election loss was difficult, but Denise took it philosophically, deciding to redefine her life in new ways. The experience caused her to resurrect and sharpen a lifelong philosophy: “When eager but hesitant, move forward.”

With the election behind her, Denise became a fierce advocate for Erie, beginning a long series of support positions at local nonprofits, with a focus on the evolving waterfront and local history. She again became a member of the PHMC, a primary driver of the new Maritime Museum and Brig Niagara; supported the work of the Erie County Historical Society; and made a valiant effort to rescue and save the historic Steamship Niagara after it was sold for scrap and moved to Port Colborn, Ontario, to be cut up and destroyed. She already had a long history of involvement in Erie’s downtown waterfront development and had contributed to most of those causes, but during the early 2000s, she became a tireless champion.

Irony and Tragedy

It was cruel irony. After having been Pennsylvania’s expert resource person with respect to Alzheimer’s and having built support programs in most of the state’s AAA organizations, Denise began to notice telltale

signs of dementia in her husband, Robbie. Eventually, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, and his care had to become more intensive. Denise shifted to full-time caregiver and moved into an apartment, which provided the best physical accoutrements for her husband. Robbie's symptoms grew progressively worse, and he died in 2010.

A Second Time Around: Butch Mullen and Michigan



DENISE WITH BUTCH MULLEN

During her college years at Manhattanville, two of Denise's roommates became involved in an orchestrated, cross-country romance. Michael Ann Mullen, who was from Michigan, introduced her brother to Ann Cunningham, who was from Boston. Her brother, Butch Mullen, was going to the University of Notre Dame at the time but began to regularly travel to Manhattanville to date Ann. The romance between Ann and Butch blossomed, and the two were married shortly after graduation in 1961, just two years after they had been introduced. Denise was supposed to be a bridesmaid, but she was in Europe that summer and could not break away from her school-sponsored tour.

Denise and Ann remained close friends, and after she married Robbie Robison, the two couples continued to see each other socially. When Robbie ended his term as Erie County executive and sought a nonpolitical job, Butch hired him as a salesman for his company, Gregg Steel, where he had risen to the position of chief executive. The work connection assured that the two couples would spend even more time together. Then unimaginable tragedy struck both families. Robbie passed away from complications of Alzheimer's disease in 2010. Ann Cunningham Mullen, Butch's wife and Denise's best friend, died a year later, in 2011.

In 2013, after spending time with each other socially, following the passing of their spouses and decades of friendship, Denise and Butch were married. And for the second time in her life, Denise Illig Robison Mullen moved into another house. Her love of Erie and local involvement persuaded her to continue to maintain a local residence, which was relatively easy since she and Robbie had moved into an apartment before he passed away. She and Butch took up residence in Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan, at a location that allowed him easy access to his job at Gregg Steel. Denise's new second home is reminiscent of Erie. Grosse Pointe Park is a waterside town tucked into the niche between Lake St. Claire and the Detroit River, so the picturesque views include water, docks, and shipping. While she lives in Grosse Pointe, she continues to visit Erie regularly so that she can stay in touch with her ongoing community commitments. The primary recent responsibility has been her contributions to the Jefferson Educational Society.



THE VIEW FROM GROSSE POINTE PARK, MICHIGAN, DENISE'S SECOND HOME

The Jefferson Educational Society



Of all the nonprofit organizations that Denise was drawn to, Erie's Jefferson Educational Society may have been "closest to her heart." As a nonpartisan think tank, the Jefferson promised hope and change for the city she has always loved. When invited to participate, she joined the founding board of directors and has proudly served ever since, offering financial and intellectual support.

Denise was first drawn to the Jefferson when Dr. William Garvey left Mercyhurst and made the decision to make a lasting contribution to Erie in the form of a nonpartisan think tank. Denise first met Garvey when her husband, Robbie, entered the race for county executive. Garvey had long been active in local politics and was a talented election consultant. He worked with Robbie during the campaign then remained as his key adviser as the new form of county government was being launched. Garvey remained close with Denise and Robbie and assisted again when she ran for City Council.

Years later, when Garvey decided to launch the Jefferson, Denise was one of the first people he approached for ideas and support. She became

actively involved as a board member and worked to propel the Jefferson's growth and development. The Jefferson Educational Society incorporated as a nonprofit in 2008. As Denise's geographic life shifted following Robbie's death and her subsequent move to Michigan, she has experienced increasing difficulty remaining active at the Jefferson. In recent years, while she has made every possible attempt to attend meetings and events, there have been several occasions when distance and family responsibilities have prevented her from being as involved as she had intended. Denise recalls a philosophy that her father, William Illig, gifted to her: "Don't be an empty chair."

In considering her life and Jefferson, Denise has finally decided to avoid being an "Empty Chair," and felt it was time to withdraw. As she retires from the board, it is a historic loss.

About the Author



Mary Ann Frew, M.A., R.N., is a retired university professor-administrator, author, and nurse. She graduated from St. Vincent School of Nursing in 1965 and worked as a nurse in Pennsylvania and Ohio for seven years before returning to the classroom to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees. In addition to emergency room and OGBYN nursing at St. Vincent and Hamot Medical Center, she taught at Erie Day

School and Erie Business College. Mary Ann joined Gannon University's "faculty of allied health" in 1977 and was the founding director of the school's medical assisting program and wrote the original curriculum for the university's physician assistant program. During her final Gannon years, she served as director of cooperative education. After leaving Gannon she has served as a school nurse and worked as operations director of Erie County Historical Society and Museums, where she was the creator of "Ethnic Erie." In recent years she has become a certified Alzheimer's disease specialist and worked to train caregivers in such aspects as memory care and family support. Mary Ann has authored more than a dozen text and trade books as well as dozens of journal articles.



Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.