



Isabell S. Notkin

1917-2003

5677-5764

*She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her. Her ways
are of pleasantness, and all her pathways are peace.*

Isabell Schulman was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, in 1917, the oldest child of Louis and Jennie Schulman. Her name wasn't Isabell then; it was Tsepara. A neighbor convinced the baby's mother that that name was too old-world, and suggested Isabell.

She grew up in an Orthodox Jewish community in a small town, carrying messages to the rabbi for members of the congregation. From her pre-teens, she raised her two younger brothers, Jake and Dave, while her parents managed a small business downstairs from their apartment. She went to an all girls' high school, and always remembered the way that the president of the student council, the leader of the band, all the important student roles were held by girls.

She commuted to college in New York City, carrying a two-dollar bill that her father gave her for emergencies tucked into the back of her wallet. When she graduated cum laude, she gave that same bill back to him. She was accepted to medical school in an era of strict quotas on both Jews and women, but her parents would only pay to educate their sons. So she got a masters' in education, and became a biology teacher.

In 1941, just as the war was starting, she married Dr. Herbert Notkin. He was serving in the Coast Guard and they lived in various places along the West Coast during and after the war. For most of the war years, she worked for the War Labor Board in San Francisco, where she made lifelong friendships with a vibrant and exciting group of people, including labor leaders, novelists, artists, and activists.

In 1950, the still childless couple moved back east. Herb took a job in Baltimore, and Debbie was born soon thereafter. Isabell always believed that moving back east somehow made it possible for her to get pregnant. Breast-feeding was completely out of fashion and her pediatrician told her he couldn't give her the first word of advice - so she asked the black women who cleaned houses in her neighborhood for help, and breastfed her daughter.

She was pregnant when they moved to Syracuse in 1954. David was born on New Year's Day, 1955. After Debbie's birth, Isabell spent about thirteen years as a full-time mom. Along with all that entails, she was very active in the League of Women Voters, and in the lives of her immediate and extended family and of her friends around the globe. Their home was a center of hospitality, warmth, and intellectual excitement. Her kids grew up assuming that everyone had friends from

many races, classes, and language groups, that there was nothing to remark on about two women living their whole lives together, that everyone was interesting.

When David was *barmitzvahed*, she was the first woman in her shul to go to the *bima* and read from the Torah; she said that she was responsible for her son's religious education and she didn't want his father to get all the credit.

In the early 1960s she went back to college, earning a second master's degree in social work, the profession she practiced for the rest of her working life. In 1966, the family moved to Westchester County. Shortly thereafter, she and her husband separated and later divorced, and she raised her growing children by herself. In this time, she relied greatly on her two brothers, Jake and David, and became very close to them, their wives, and their five children.

Once settled in Westchester, she started working as a medical social worker at the community hospital, and worked there for more than 25 years. She watched the hospital change as patient care was more and more counted in dollars. Arguing with a brash young hospital administrator, she said, "As long as I am in this job a patient will never be confused with a can of peas."

She put off retiring, in large part because she was afraid she would be bored. No one took these fears seriously, especially since almost before she walked out of the hospital door, she took a two-day-a-week job doing elder care social work. She also never stopped her "kitchen practice," dispensing advice, comfort, good food, and common sense to a steady stream of relatives, friends, friends of her kids, colleagues, and more. David's marriage to Cathy Tuttle brought her great joy. In 1989, when she was 72, she broke an ankle while hiking, and described the experience as a "rehearsal for old age." Her brother Jake died with no warning and her first grandchild was born unable to thrive. She rode those two hard blows with grief and grace, and moved forward.

In 1992 she was present at the home birth of her granddaughter — nervous about actually being at the birth, she planned to come after the baby was born, but Emma and Cathy had a better idea. Isabell was always grateful to have been there for both Emma's birth and Akiva's. In the mid-1990s, she made perhaps the most visionary move of her life, picking herself up and resettling in an independent living residence in Seattle. She was neither too old nor too sick to live by herself, she just

wanted to make those choices for herself and not burden anyone with having to make them for her.

She settled in to Seattle, serving on the board of the Fremont Public Association, going to every exhibit, and performance she could get to, reveling in her grandchildren and teaching them the skills she learned in her girlhood, and continuing to dispense advice, comfort, good food, and common sense to everyone from university department chairs to kitchen staff, always with the same irresistible mixture of wit, wisdom, and self-effacement. In her last years, she was more worried about her surviving brother's failing health than about her own.

Everyone she touched was the better for knowing her. Jewish tradition tells us that the *tzaddikim*, the great sources of wisdom and kindness who hold the world together, are all men. Those of us who knew Isabell know better.

To remember Isabell, you can leave a small stone if you visit her gravesite and/or make a donation to the Fremont Public Association www.fremontpublic.org (206) 694-6700, a Seattle social service agency where she served on the board for several years. She is buried at Bikur Cholim Cemetery 1340 North 115th Street in Seattle.



Praised are You, who has kept us in life, sustained us and enabled us to reach this season.