



Greta Calabrese

September 8, 2022

Greta Calabrese, a daughter of Norway who lived a life overflowing with love, laughter, deep friendships, and profound fulfillment over nearly five decades in New Jersey, died Sept. 8. She was 75.

Greta was born in Moss, a small town near Oslo, but by the time she was 5, she and her parents had emigrated to the United States. First stop was Park Ridge, a suburb of Chicago, where she graduated with honors from Main South High School. One of her fellow students was a teenager named Hillary Rodham, who years later invited her classmates to a reunion at the White House. Next came Bradley University, where she graduated in 1969 with a bachelor of arts degree.

But the bright lights of New York City beckoned. Within months, Greta Holmberg had settled in Queens and was hired as a men's clothing account manager by Oxford Industries for J.C. Penney. It was there that she met an up-and-coming "rag" supplier for the company named Bob Calabrese, the man who would become her husband of 52 years. Forever after, Greta loved to say that her first job in the Big Apple was in men's pants – and that one of the first pants she got her hands into were Bob's.

The hot-blooded Italian from Brooklyn and the shy, stoic Norwegian from Illinois. The rabid Mets fan and the cool ice skater who could pull off axels.

The perfect unmatched couple.

She was his “Pussy Cat.” He became her “Teddy Bear.” Everyone else knew them as Greta and Bob. To each other, they were Tuddy and Teddy.

Tud and Ted.

Of course, there were cultures to bridge and a (Brooklyn) bridge to cross as the Holmberg and Calabrese families, so different in temperament and background, came together.

First up was Greta’s introduction to her future in-laws on a humid summer day. Decked out in her finest – and shortest – mini skirt for the special occasion, she was horrified to discover that her bare legs had stuck to the plastic seat cover on the Calabreses’ living room couch. She literally couldn’t get up.

And then there was the night Greta and Bob brought her reserved parents to the unreserved Brooklyn homestead for everyone to meet each other. Said her confused Mom, Ella: “I don’t know these people yet – why are we kissing them?”

It was a quick courtship. Bob gradually moved in after three or four months, one suit at a time. Eight months later, on Aug. 8, 1970, they were married. They stayed in Queens for a time, where Greta worked a variety of jobs while she continued her education, earning a master’s degree in English literature from Hunter College. They bought their first house, in Upper Nyack, N.Y., moved on to Cresskill, N.J. and ultimately settled into their forever home, in Tenafly, 39 years ago.

Along the way, the Calabreses collected a menagerie of friends – generations of them, really – that kept growing and growing. Their friends were their family.

And oh, my, if you were lucky enough to be a friend of Greta Calabrese! She celebrated you. She introduced you to other pals from other parts of her life until you all became one big colony of love and affection. There were Friday Night Pizza parties (probably 50 weeks out of the year), summer days at the Tenakill Swim Club where she served as its long-time publicist, more than a few late-night winter drinking jags. She laughed uproariously with you but also offered some serious advice when she thought it was the right thing to do. She took care of you when you needed it. There were travels with friends to Italy and St. Maarten and France, to name a few places – “They have a right to be arrogant,” she exclaimed when she saw Paris for the first time – as well as spectacular dinners in the city and simple takeout meals at home.

Greta inspired loyalty and compassion and repaid it tenfold. Her generosity knew no bounds. She even suffered fools gladly – to a point – if they had been her friends first. (The rest of them be damned.)

And then, on May 8, 1982, the wonderful, stylish, very fun life that Greta and Bob had built for themselves suddenly, miraculously changed when a tiny blonde baby grabbed on to her mother’s heartstrings and never let go.

Welcome to the world, Alix Calabrese. It was, after all, always going to be about Alix.

Greta was always by Alix’s side. She went through everything with – and for – her. There was the Ridgewood YMCA Breakers swim team. Alix joined, so Greta became a huge supporter, driving her to daily dawn practices and attending every meet during every season for all of the years Alix participated. She was elected as the Breakers’ president, a very public role that required the kind of public speaking that was excruciating for her. But no matter; she

would do anything – ANYTHING – for her daughter even if it terrified her. And she always pulled off a great show.

She was a class mother throughout Alix's grade school years, making sure to appreciate and recognize the full extent of diversity in those classrooms no matter the established customs. Greta gleefully shattered a few conventions along the way.

And there were those damn surgeries – nine of them over about eight years – to correct scoliosis in Alix's spine. Surgeries in New York, in Hackensack, in Newark. Greta was by her side night and day – as cheerleader, caregiver, confidante – helping her daughter believe that she could conquer any adversity, even one this daunting, with faith, resolve and very hard work. And conquer she did to her mother's everlasting and very fierce pride.

As Alix said in her own recent tribute to her Mom: "Thank you for literally devoting your entire life to me. I love you so much."

Alix and her husband, Ken Grubbs, who were married in 2011, welcomed their own son into the world in 2014. And how Hudson Green Grubbs loved his "Gigi!" The two would Facetime each other every day and sign off at his bedtime with a "Night, night."

Here are some things people might not know about Greta:

She liked her Pepsi cold and her chardonnay warm.

She had a great sense of style, with a favorite Ralph Lauren outfit and truly gorgeous boots, until she didn't care about any of that anymore. She moved seamlessly from high fashion to straw visors.

She was a season subscriber to the American Ballet Theatre but was just as happy listening to Mark Knopfler, the Beatles and Tom Petty.

Irreverence became her. She wore it like a badge of honor. “Stick it in your ear,” she would say if you got to be too annoying. “Eat me” was another friendly putdown.

She could be fairly tolerant of differing viewpoints – as long as they weren’t hurtful – unless she thought you were an ass. If that was the case, you were branded an ass for life. Greta didn’t like asses. Don’t get her started.

Flipping the bird was often a term of endearment – except when it wasn’t. You always knew the difference.

She treasured her four-legged friends, and couldn’t have been a better mother to Boris and Tasha, Chablis, Bosco, Brownie, Milo, Scotch and Soda and Tommy and Picabo, as well as an honorary mom to frequent canine visitors like Colie. And let’s not forget Tigger and Turner, the stray cats she adopted, fed and housed in her garage for years.

She was a most valued member of the staff of The North Jersey Suburbanite when it was a thriving weekly newspaper, joining it as a proofreader and later becoming a municipal reporter before she had Alix.

She was fastidious. Every hair was always in place and every room in her house was neat and ordered. But that didn’t stop her from thoroughly enjoying the epic food fights that Alix’s godmother would stage once a year on her birthday. Until she had to clean it all up.

Greta hated Donald J. Trump. She wanted everyone to know that. And now you do.

Her sense of decency was profound and a lack of decency on anyone's part was unimaginable to her.

She was a model of extreme, invigorating competence. Intellectually, she could rock anything. And she was so smart that the only way Bob could pull off a surprise party for her 50th birthday was to hold it on her 49th.

When the weather got a little nippy and the leaves started to turn colors, most folks would think about Halloween – what costumes to wear, what candy to buy. Greta was getting ready for Christmas. For Greta, Christmas was a three-month holiday. Every corner of the house was decorated. Every gift – and there were legions – was a color-coordinated thing of beauty. She used to say that wrapping presents was like therapy. And oh those Christmas mornings for her cherished Alix. And then for Hudson. It was heaven.

But before Christmas came Christmas Eve – the epic Calabrese bash that Greta oversaw, literally soup to nuts, champagne to vodka, baked clams to raw clams to seafood salad to fried shrimp with escarole and linguini with white clam sauce plus a ton of Italian bread. One long-time celebrant described the scene as “the most magical, beautiful, delightful night imaginable.”

“The dining room table surrounded by loving family and friends, and the tabletop filled with delicious platters of all the seasonal foods,” he wrote. “We could taste the love Greta imparted into every morsel. The table and the entire home sparkled with the Christmas spirit. She worked so tirelessly preparing, doing everything to make this night memorable for everyone. It gave her unbounded joy and happiness.”

As it did everyone who was lucky enough to snag an invitation. One hilarious sidenote: Greta adored her Christmas Eves, but on the other 364 days of the year, she hated to cook. Hated it. And so she didn't. She had the cleanest oven ever because she never used it. And so, every December, when she was getting ready to make dozens and dozens of her deservedly famous baked clams, she had to root around in the kitchen to find the instruction manual that told her how to use the broiler.

Greta could be a tangle of contradictions that only added to her lore. By her own admission, she was painfully shy, but she also had an indomitable inner strength, a sense of independence and a ferocity of spirit that she channeled to push herself so hard to do things that didn't come naturally to her – even if it scared her to pieces. She was her own muse – and will now live on as ours..

Greta is survived by her husband, Robert, of Tenafly; her daughter and son-in-law, Alix Calabrese Grubbs and Ken Grubbs, of Cresskill, and her grandson Hudson. She was predeceased by her parents, Henry and Ella Jacobsen Holmberg, of Illinois.

If anyone is so inclined, the family would appreciate donations in Greta's memory to the ASPCA.

Tribute Wall

CW

“ *Christina & Anthony Wrenn lit a candle in memory of Greta Calabrese*



Christina & Anthony Wrenn - September 15, 2022 at 11:29 AM

AS

“ *I have such amazing memories spending time with the Calabrese family growing up. We spent so many fun summer days together at Tenakill, and even more early mornings and late nights driving to and from Breakers practice and meets. Reading Greta's obituary brought back so many great memories. She always played the coolest music when she drove the carpool, she was usually pretty quiet but every now and then she'd throw out supper witty comment or joke, and I even think I remember her flipping the bird a few times :)*

My heart goes out to Alix and Bob and the extended family. Sending love and and hugs. Here's to Greta!

Abbie Steinbacher - September 14, 2022 at 03:04 AM

AB

“ *I worked with Greta at Maugham School in Tenafly. She was a kind, intelligent woman often hidden behind a tougher exterior, but once you got to know her and her wry wit, there was nothing but sheer magic and a very giving personality! She was a gem!*

Abby Bergman - September 13, 2022 at 05:39 PM

MQ

“ *Maureen Quinn lit a candle in memory of Greta Calabrese*



Maureen Quinn - September 13, 2022 at 01:57 PM

AL

“ *1 file added to the album Photo Wall*



Alix - September 13, 2022 at 12:31 PM