

[Living \(Http://Www.Philly.Com/Living\)](http://www.philly.com/living)

What to keep, what to donate from the home of a missed mother

Updated: DECEMBER 30, 2015 — 8:54 AM EST



 **CATHERINE LAUGHLIN**

Keepers from Mom's collection: Her leather gloves and a pair of vintage Chanel rhinestone earrings.

by **Catherine Laughlin**, For The Inquirer

The day I'd been dreading arrived. The best I could hope for was that it wouldn't rain.



What to keep, what to donate from the home of a missed mother

(http://www.philly.com/philly/living/20151230_What_to_keep,_what_to_donate_from_the_home_of_a_missed_mother viewGallery=y)

It was seven months since my mother died of cancer. When her sturdy, yet worn, two-bedroom rowhouse in Mayfair sold in the fall, I was thrust into the inescapable and forlorn duty of cleaning out her house. An only child, I've been responsible for settling her affairs.

Even though my name was on the deed, I always considered it my mom's home. After I bought the house, I lived in it only a few years before I married. My mom had always loved the house. Twenty years ago, she and my father moved into it when his Parkinson's disease progressed. The one-story structure seemed like an affordable and safe spot for them to age in place, although my dad lived there for only three years before moving to a nursing home.

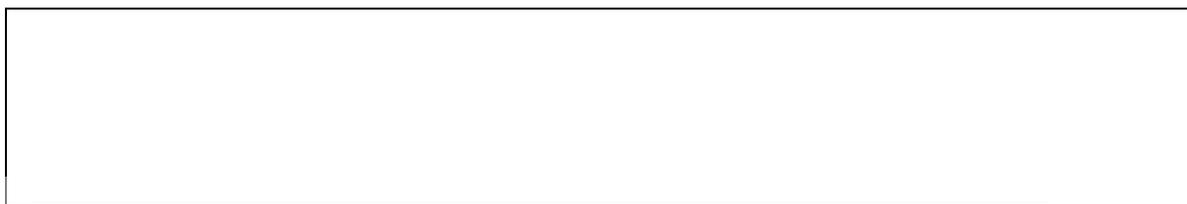
Over the summer, I made weekly trips to her house to collect mail, keep it temperate, and make sure the front lawn was cut. Opening the door, I still smelled her essence, a fusion of Dove .soap and a dollar-store hand cream. Once inside, I'd again see her collection of spoons, the countless framed faces of my kids ("a shrine," my husband once mused), and her pink-and-white robe, still stuffed with her tissues in the pockets, hanging on her bedroom door. My mother in life had been adrenalized, with a twitchy verve, and she could talk the legs off a horse. Standing there, it was the clamoring silence that got to me each time.

I planned the clean-out day around my husband and four kids' schedules, as well as those of my godmother and her son's family. I needed muscle, but I was also needy of emotional support. Sorting through her home would churn a barrel of laughs, surprises, and sorrow.

Deciding what to do with certain things was easy. Before she died, she'd asked me to donate her clothes to charities. Her maple tables, her brass lamps, and her cherry bedroom set, I knew I'd keep. Ditto for her lace doilies, leather gloves, and lasagna pan. I'd forgotten about her polished china, Bavarian Christmas ornaments, and etched-glass mugs, bought in Germany when my father was stationed there.

My mom, like millions of others from the Greatest Generation, overcame hardship and poverty, which contributed to her stubborn insistence to keep "good" things. We giggled at some of her stockpile: Cheetah-printed sweaters (5), scarves (24), screwdrivers (14), white plastic hangers and backs of earrings (too many to tally).

One closet contained boxes of beauty kits from QVC, flashlights, and packages of clear-plastic rain caps.



A surprising find were vintage Chanel rhinestone earrings, scattered in a jewelry box among mismatched hoops, bangle bracelets, and loose change. I hesitated about selling her blue sofa bed on Craigslist but could almost hear her sanctioning it: "Let someone

who really wants it get it out. That thing's so heavy to move!" Which caused a quandary for me about her other effects: Did the broken Seiko watch that I don't remember her wearing have any special meaning to her?

In the garage, she had packed away her autograph book from when she was a teenager, greeting cards, and, (Ma, you're killing me) my grade-school artwork. Other boxes held knickknacks from a Hawaiian vacation 47 years ago, shot glasses, my father's wooden shoeshine box, and snapshots seizing mundane moments: One of me wearing white go-go boots. My father with a crew cut leaning on a Dodge. And my mom wearing a boxy A-line skirt and her wide crooked smile.

At times, rummaging through my mom's belongings felt like a violation. And the permanence of her loss reaffirmed itself and descended on me like a fog. I would also discover that my mother died carrying at least one secret. When I found several articles about different types of cancer filed in a plastic container that she'd meticulously cut out of newspapers and magazines dated three years ago, I realized she had intuited for a long while that she was sick. How could she not have told me?

At the end of the day, I stood at the front door as the sun glinted through the window blinds. For a second, I saw my mother bustle down the hallway into the haze. I thought about the new owner, an older woman, who the Realtor had said was excited to move in.

And then I closed the door.

Published: December 30, 2015 — 8:54 AM EST **The Philadelphia Inquirer**

© Copyright (<http://www.philly.com/philly/about/copyright/>)2018 Philadelphia Media Network (Digital), LLC
[Terms of Use & Privacy Policy \(http://www.philly.com/philly/about/terms_of_use/\)](http://www.philly.com/philly/about/terms_of_use/)