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COURTESY OF MARGO HOWARD

Advice columnist Margo Howard, who wrote Dear Prudence and Dear Margo, died last month at 86.

I will miss my friend Margo, who told me to grieve, but not too much

By Meredith Goldstein
GLOBE STAFF

My friend Margo Howard died last month. She was 86.

Margo was the daughter of Eppie Lederer, better known as famous advice columnist Ann Landers.

Margo was also an advice columnist; she began writing Dear Prudence for Slate when in her late 50s. She also wrote Dear Margo, which was published by The Boston Globe.

Over the years, people have asked me about the personalities of advice columnists and how we differ. I usually say that some of us are forceful with our counsel, while others are soft. Some are hilarious — and a few are *too* hilarious ... at the expense of the letter writer, who has asked a real question.

I am a softie. I usually go the route of, "You're doing OK! Give yourself space and time to heal! It's OK to be sad! Feel hurt for as long as you want!" Rarely have I said to a question asker, "Get over it already."

Margo gave tougher love to her letter writers, but not too tough. She was empathetic but didn't hold back. Her writing was a reflection of who she was in person — opinionated, practical, confident, and, on occasion, splendidly sarcastic with an implied eye-roll for the ages.

She lived in Cambridge when I met her through a friend at the Globe. I had just started the Love Letters column, not fully knowing what I had gotten myself into. Margo, who was writing Dear Margo at the time, was living in an apartment at the Charles Hotel in Cambridge.

Over 15 or so years after that first meeting, she gave me advice about my advice. Sometimes she agreed with what I had to say; sometimes she had other opinions.

She also gave me advice about *my* life, all of which I loved, even when it didn't help — because it was always clever.

Once she said to me, as we wandered through the Charles Hotel, passing its high-end restaurant and in-house spa, "*You* should live in a hotel when you're older and ready. It makes life a lot easier."

I explained that I did not have the kind of money that would allow me to buy a condo in a hotel. Then she gave me one of her *Margo looks,* which was her way of telling me: "Oh dear, you should really figure out how to get more money."

Good advice, of course. I'm still working on it.

It always felt like I'd won a golden ticket when I was in her company. She'd known celebrities, everyone from literary giants to famous actors. Sometimes she'd tell me something about a celebrity I wasn't even old enough to have heard of, but the way Margo told the tale was so good I was riveted. I wanted to hear her version of everything.

Sometimes our advice columnist brains didn't align, which made sense — because we were opposites in so many ways. She'd been married four times and could make jokes about it. I'd been monumentally single for the better part of a decade when I met her, and was still crying over past breakups that no longer should have mattered.

I was an anxious ruminator, but she would tell me to look ahead — and *beyond*. If she was at a bad party, or in a bad marriage, she was happy to get to the next, better one.

That was her big lesson for me: that after loss, I could find happiness again. She wanted me to avoid getting stuck in a miserable moment that had passed.

When my mom died, in 2013, Margo gave me a necklace that belonged to her own mother. Wearing Ann Landers's jewelry made me feel like a superhero — like it gave me the power to stop feelings from consuming me.

Margo handed me the necklace with a directive. She said I was allowed to grieve — that I'd be grieving over my mother forever — but I couldn't do it "full-time" for more than a few months.

She said that nonstop grief wasn't healthy ... and would make me kind of a drag.

I took that seriously — her belief that I should find new sources of joy, to continue to make jokes, and, to some extent, *get over it*.

It's helped me become a happier person, to know that you can feel loss while making room for new and better moments.

I will miss her, but I promise, in honor of her, not too much.

I will think of her when I hear good stories and when I laugh. I will not dwell, only remember.

Thank you, Margo, for giving me permission.

Ellen Greene revisits Audrey for 'Little Shop of Horrors' film's 40th anniversary, and will attend a screening in Boston

By Lindsey Bahr
ASSOCIATED PRESS

LITTLE SHOP OF HORRORS 40th ANNIVERSARY SCREENING
Featuring Ellen Greene. Aug 28 at 8 p.m., Emerson Colonial Theatre. 106 Boylston St. Tickets from $47. atgtickets.com

Ellen Greene can still do a killer Audrey.

In conversation, she seamlessly slips in and out of that singular voice — a little breathy, a little squeaky, a little lispy, a little New York — that made her "Little Shop of Horrors" heroine an instant icon. It wasn't a register she'd planned on hitting at the audition. It just came out of her in the moment, and it stuck.

"I didn't think about it," Greene, 75, said in a recent interview with the Associated Press. "It was weird, I mean, I don't know where half of this stuff came from."

In her long and robust career on the stage and screen, Audrey is perhaps Greene's defining role. Her tragicomic shopgirl of skid row belted her way into audiences' hearts off-Broadway in 1982, and then in Frank Oz's 1986 film opposite Rick Moranis.

The catchy musical about that flesh-eating plant is never too far in the rearview either. Every few years it seems she's beckoned for an encore. In 2015, she reprised the role for three sold-out shows, with Jake Gyllenhaal playing Seymour.

Starting this weekend, she'll be making stops around the country for the next few months for 40th anniversary screenings, from Seattle (Aug. 18) to Atlanta (Nov. 13), and Boston on Aug. 28. Performances of "Somewhere That's Green" have been promised too.

That aching ballad about wanting more, aside from being one of the big showstoppers, holds a special place for Greene. She remembers first listening to it on the unemployment line, waiting to get her check, and quietly singing along.

"I just knew there was an Audrey inside of me waiting to be born," Greene said.

She carried that feeling to the audition where composer Alan Menken jumped in to play the piano with lyricist Howard Ashman, already her great friend, looking on. When she finished, everyone was in tears.

Getting the role wasn't any sort of immediate windfall either. When they started at the WPA Theatre in New York, she was being paid $50 a week for a month of rehearsals and two months of shows off-Broadway. But it was a hit. One night, Steve Martin, who would later play Audrey's abusive dentist boyfriend in the film, even came to see it with Mary Tyler Moore.

On the stage, she performed "Somewhere That's Green" sitting on a trash can. For the film, Ashman wrote the number to be staged like the Leslie Caron and Cyd Charisse numbers they both loved, where a character walks into a room and suddenly they're in a different outfit for the song.

"You would think I would just have been floored and so excited that he gave me this gift," she said. "Instead, I call him up and I'm crying my eyes out. And I'm saying, wait for this, 'Where's my trash can?'"

Ashman, she said, just laughed and assured her that they'd elicit the same response when the camera pans out to reveal she's still on skid row. Ironically, this whole exchange happened before she'd even officially been cast in the movie.

The story of how the film was made is long and bumpy. John Landis was originally attached to direct, then, briefly, Martin Scorsese, before it found its way to Oz. Greene's participation was never a given, either. Producer David Geffen wanted to get a "bigger name," like Cyndi Lauper, on screen.

"I never thought I would have gotten the film," Greene said.

But it's hard to imagine anyone else turning in a performance as distinctive. Test audiences loved her Audrey so much that they wholly rejected an ending in which she dies.

"I love that death scene, personally," Greene said. "But I had an inkling, you see, because Frank directed the Audrey for the screen more heroine-like."

He'd taken out lines from the play like "you don't meet nice boys when you live on skid row," she said in Audrey-speak. She thinks it set her up a little differently. Then at the end, there's the line "when I die, which should be very shortly." On stage, she said it to the audience. In the film, she says it to Seymour. It's more intimate and serious.

"Frank thinks it's because we didn't take a bow, like in the play, but I think it's because it's just the line is interpreted two different ways. One sets it up that this is silly and I'm OK, and the other one is it's real and it's touching," she said.

Oz ultimately relented and they shot a happier conclusion. Now, Greene just likes that they both exist (the original in a director's cut).

Remembering "Little Shop" is also a way to remember Ashman, who died of complications related to AIDS in 1991. Their friendship was one of many laughs, songs, and adventures. He even took her on her first trip to Paris.

"We got into my room and he put on a bubble bath, because he knows I love bubble baths. I got into the bath, he gave me Champagne, he gave me caviar, he put on Piaf," she said. "We had separate rooms, of course, but we were close, so what can you do? And I'm from the theater, so I'm not modest."

He also looked out for her. When they were drawing up contracts for the "Little Shop" stage run, all she could think about was making sure London was in there. Unbeknownst to her, Ashman had also given her a half point of the profit, "because I created Audrey," she said.

"That's how generous and kind he was and how much he loved me," she said. "Everybody loves Audrey because we, I, loved her first. And everybody loves "Little Shop" because we put so much love in it. ... I am so grateful and very humble because when they love 'Little Shop', they keep it alive, and they keep Howard Ashman alive."

BIRDIE THOMPSON/AP

WARNER BROS. VIA AP

Ellen Greene, pictured last week in Los Angeles (above) and as Audrey in the film adaptation of "Little Shop of Horrors" (below). Greene will appear at Emerson Colonial Theatre Aug. 28 for a screening of the film.