You are all amazing for coming today. Thank you. I’m bowled over with your generosity for buying a ticket and giving your valuable time. It’s wonderful for McKee and me. Waldo Sexton would be thrilled that you are supporting his precious garden and me. Did anyone ever tell you why it’s called McKee and not Sexton Botanical Garden? Arthur McKee was the business partner, the financier for the garden. He had his own engineering firm specializing in the iron and steel industry. He had a separate company, the Blast Furnace Appliance Company, which managed the many patents he developed and licensed them. He was rich and he did not pick up a single shovel, hoe or machete. He lived in Cleveland and he was far away, in Russia, I think, building factories or something while Waldo was here in Vero, all day, everyday for years, sweating his vision into reality. 100% of the ticket sales today goes to pay for the fabulous work they do here at McKee Botanical Garden, entertaining people of all ages and inspiring all to see and feel the beauty in nature and in this special spot on the planet. Vero is unique and the garden is unique. Waldo’s hands in creating both express his uniqueness

It’s meaningful for me to be here because I have fond memories of parties and tours of the Garden when I was a child. Watching my grandfather, Waldo Sexton, in action in the Garden, I knew it was a big deal to him. I heard stories about what hard work it was to build it. Think of all the swamp jokes you know. I found it thrilling as a kid. I felt terror and excitement at being in a jungle where I might get lost with wild animals that might bite me or eat me. The royal palms and the hall of giants awed me. I loved all the pretty ladies in their fancy long dresses and swimsuits. They all seemed very glamorous and festive to me. I never heard anybody say if being a McKee beauty was a good job or not, or what it paid, but they made me believe they were having fun. Waldo certainly seemed to believe everything was enhanced with a beautiful woman posed in front. He was a good marketer as well as entrepreneur -- and not afraid of hard physical work.

It’s meaningful to me to be here with you today for our purpose of celebrating one of Waldo’s best gifts to the town and my latest creation. You are all part of the story, the history of us. Everyone in the room shares some of the same memories of living and being part of this landscape. Many of you went to school with me and that’s a special bond of experience. Raise your hand if you went to VBHS with me. Wow. That makes today even more special. The clever Japanese have an expression, *Ichi-go ichi-e*, that applies to all of us here in the room, “one meeting, one moment in your life that will never happen again.”

To make this moment meaningful for you I am going to share my personal memories about Waldo that hardly anyone has ever heard before. Like anyone who receives a lot of press, the same Waldo stories get told over and over. I want to add something new to the history of Waldo; a different point of view on a complex man – and how I came to write a book about finding love late in life, aging, traveling and cooking.

When I entered the world, 12th Street between 43rd Avenue and Kings Highway was called Rosedale Road. Our mile was a single lane of white sand or more frequently mud puddles and it seemed far away from town. The road could rattle your teeth and give you quite a bounce in those days. The road grater didn’t come nearly enough. Our side of the street was all cow pasture and groves with only our house and Waldo’s house close together at the mid point and maybe three small rental houses east of the dairy closer to 43rd. Our telephone number had four digits and there was no TV.

The night I was born, I think Waldo was 67 years old. He was mid Atlantic on an ocean liner, returning from Europe and he sent me a telegram of enthusiastic congratulations on my arrival and about picking such great parents and grandparents. I treasured that welcome, read it many times imagining him writing it -- and it was the only telegram I ever received.

Waldo or Papa as we called him, lived next door at the end of the pink sidewalk that joined the two houses, with his wife Elsebeth, her mother whom we all called grandma and her sister, Eva whom I called E. Waldo’s in-laws were relatively new, permanent houseguests from Chicago. One was a 90 year-old tired of running a boarding house and the other a 60-something retired teacher. Elsebeth’s age will remain a mystery because that’s the way she liked it. I was extraordinarily lucky to arrive when all four were in residence happy, relatively healthy and delighted to enjoy a new baby. Meanwhile my family already had two sophisticated older kids who had friends and went to school. I had the run of both places all to myself. Before I could walk, Eva would come get me from my crib several times a day and take me next door to visit everyone. As soon as I was able, I ran next door several times a day to see what was new with my friends, Papa, Nana, Grandma and E. Raise your hand if you have a grandchild. All of you know exactly how this relationship goes. It’s almost a chemical attraction that must have genetics to it, the magic of the grandchild relationship.

There was always something exciting going on in the yard, upstairs or in the kitchen. E had taken me on as a student from the first day and had me reading long before I went to first grade. I barely remember not being able to read. I clearly remember the day E was reading a story to me pointing out the words as she went along and me exclaiming, “That's the?” looking at her in wonder about acquiring that small but important word.

Every time I went through the screen door to the kitchen I got a treat. That was Elsebeth’s teaching. She had a sweet tooth and cleverly lined up jars right by the kitchen door to help yourself. Big people with long arms could reach inside the jar without even coming in the kitchen. Other cans or jars were stored farther away or higher up so that you needed an invitation or assistance. The routine sweets menu included home-made cookies, usually Danish wedding cookies, store bought candy like jelly beans or M&M’s; chocolates from California, macadamia nuts, poppycock, and peanut brittle.

Q: Does anyone remember what kids ate in the 1950s?

A: Whatever was put in front of them. I don't recall anyone ever asking me what I wanted to eat. I’m stunned in the grocery store to hear modern moms ask their toddlers what they want for dinner tonight. This is so not the 1950s any more.

My earliest memories of Papa and Nana are about eating in the breakfast porch. They loved good food and took pleasure in being at the table. The conversation was always lively. I walked in the kitchen one day to find the crowd around the table for lunch, even grandma was downstairs, which was unusual and made me think she might have cooked whatever it was they were eating. They all watched me stare wide-eyed at a big platter with a long pink tongue on it. I was about 3 and it seemed about 3 feet long to me.

“Do you know what it is, Karen?”

“It looks a tongue, but whose is it?” They all roared laughing.

“Sit down and have some.”

I sat down and someone fixed me a plate and I had a bite with all eyes waiting for my verdict as I chewed.

“What do you think of it?”

“Well, it feels like a tongue.” That got another big laugh. I did not mind eating the tongue once I got past the curious texture. The flavor seemed bland compared to sausage or corned beef. But the hot German potato salad that came with it was a big hit with me. It’s a taste memory I treasure. That specific sweet and sour balance is still the standard for me in that style of potato salad. I have tried unsuccessfully to duplicate it.

Papa had the kitchen to himself early in the morning, which made it a nice time to visit him alone and he frequently cooked an omelet for me. All the women would still be asleep upstairs. He never minded me interrupting his newspaper. Now I can appreciate how happy he would have been for the interruption from world events. I used to love to read the paper but I find it so painful these days. Is that an aging thing? I don’t recall him cooking at any other meal. Nana was not a cook. She had a cook. Applesauce was one of the few things Nana prepared besides cookies. Her favorite restaurant things were frog legs and lamb chops. I agreed with her on all her choices. Papa seemed to like everything. By my time in their story, the cook came only at night and made the dinner for them. I ate dinner at home at 6:30 sharp with my family, another rule of the 1950s.

Special occasions were all marked with special food. On Christmas morning we always had real maple syrup and maple sugar from Vermont for pancakes. The holiday meals at night with the whole family, about 20 people with all the uncles, aunts and cousins, would feature an enormous roast beef, ham or turkey. The most memorable turkey was one from the backyard coop, which I watched being beheaded by an axe, literally running around without its head and then hanging upside down with his feet tied to the clothesline to drain. I was fascinated by it, not squeamish at all. Holidays always featured an after dinner theatrical production written and directed by me, starring my younger cousins.

My favorite memories are alone with Papa, watching him work in his outdoor studio or going to a project site. He worked in the open air in front of a large 3-sided structure, full of big boards, wrought iron pieces and other artifacts. The walls were decorated with many treasures and near the entrance he had a collection of what looked like giant toothbrushes in various sizes with long wooden handles with wire bristles for removing rust and old paint from the wrought iron. He was sweaty and dirty, seldom had a shirt on but he always wore his Stetson hat. I thought he looked like a cave man working with prehistoric tools on a monolithic task. I would look at a black, rusty gate big enough to close a road and think this is going to take forever! He took his time and was careful. He was patient with the process. I enjoyed hanging out there, watching him work, and seeing him making progress every day. We chatted. He was enjoying himself. I always thought he had more fun than any of the other grown ups. You could see his pleasure in his work, eating and talking with people. I admired that. I wanted to have fun too when I grew up.

Papa had a great sense of humor. He laughed and he made me laugh. He was always a salesman, a showman and making theatre of small things.

One day when I was about four I was annoyed with the people next door and decided to run away and find some nice people to live with. I packed my doll’s suitcase and went across the pink sidewalk to say goodbye to Papa, who was out working in his studio. He said, "Oh, sorry you're leaving. I’ll miss you. Won’t you need a hat and umbrella where you are going? We should take a photograph to remember you by. We'll put it in the living room and say, look, that's Karen, she used to live here with us."

He sprung into action getting props from I don't know where and soon there I was posing in front of the family station wagon in our garage with my new hat and umbrella ready to travel and he had assembled a crowd to send me off, just like when we went to send Papa and Nana off on trips. Although I hadn’t been anywhere yet, except the train station and the airport to wave goodbye and hello when they came back. I felt full of anticipation. My traveling days had begun. More about that later.

Nana and Papa had a big set of suitcases in different sizes that were beautiful! They were gray leather with wine leather trim and hard structured. Watching the suitcases come out of the attic was very exciting to me. To this day I still get a thrill when I get my suitcase out. It’s sort of a Pavlovian affect.

Being around the house and yard made it easy for him to ask me if I wanted to go for a ride to wherever he was going. Why would you ever say no to that? Here’s another unusual thing about the 1950s, I never asked anybody if I could go, I did what I wanted to do. Unbelievable today, but no one was particularly watching or worried about me. I had two houses and yards to roam in. I imagine that if I were to scream, several people would come running but I don’t recall it ever happening. So, I watched the Mountain take shape as the concrete was poured for the stairs and the tile installed. My favorite memory of the Mountain is the day they poured the concrete for the thrones at the top of it. Papa was in his usual kaki pants and with an audience, sat in the wet concrete and smooshed his imprint into so it would be a perfect seat for him. He was delighted with the feel of the wet concrete and communicating by grinning. Everyone laughed. Two regular helpers were there with brooms for sweeping up and he invited them into the picture to wave their brooms like palm frond fans for a pharaoh in the heat. It was hilarious, not only to me. It was documented with photos as most of his activities were. Oddly enough I never noticed who was taking the pictures.

The Turf Club building, occupied for so many years by the Sachenwan Palace Restaurant, had quite a large entourage of artists and workmen involved in repurposing an old building Papa had bought and delivered to the site, with a great deal of revelry everyday. By that I mean boisterous, noisy, lots of conversation and laughing. I don’t recall any of their names. We all had a job and were busy. My job was painting the back of a door in the dining room on the left of the original entrance on 43rd Avenue. The goal was to make it look like a very old green door by putting lots of layers of different colors of paint on it. I worked on it every time I was there and Papa would give me tips on brush technique. He knew quite a bit about how to age things. He didn’t want anything to look new. I also posed for two murals. The one in the front hallway featured a dramatic nighttime campfire in the woods, a pot of gold and a mixed crowd of indians, pirates, Papa and me, all eyeing the gold. The mural was a little scary to me with tension and danger in the negotiation. You can’t tell who’s going to get the gold. In one of the back rooms off to the right, covering a complete wall was a large pasture scene, very Florida, very Treasure Hammock Ranch and me milking a cow in the middle of it. The artist must not have known that the cows at the ranch were beef cattle. Despite what you might think about my proximity to cows and a dairy that is the only cow I ever milked. In retrospect all this posing I did may have been Papa’s sly angle on childcare, like a smart babysitter we had taking us fishing where we had to be quiet and sit still or the fish won’t bite.

It was clear to me that Papa was the creative director, the center of attention and a participant in the group experience. I recall discussion about the placement of the old coins in the floor and what went where on the walls. He was thoughtful and deliberate, not haphazard. He thoroughly enjoyed the process and all the details. He was collaborative. It seemed to me everyone enjoyed working with him and wanted his attention.

My take away from my life with Waldo was to enjoy your work, pay attention to the details, have fun with people and eat good food. I absorbed his aesthetic. I revere beautiful things. I love wrought iron, tile and wood. I like the description “folk architect” for his free form process of building without a blueprint. As an architect he built simple structures with rooms that were pleasant to be in with good proportions and sited well for the tropical breezes, heavy rain and views. He talked about proportions and believed that stairs had a perfect rise and tread depth. I think he built because he wanted to decorate with the stuff he collected. I’m with him on that. Decorating is fun, creative and tangible. Immediate results. Next to cooking, I like decorating. I am obsessed with my house. It’s always in the process of being enhanced. Rehanging the art is a free way of dramatically changing a room and re-appreciating the art you have. He could see the beauty in an object and be able to give it a new life by using it in a new way or making it part of a new collection. He understood the power of arrangements and contrasts in textures or colors. Let’s pause for one moment to remember that the scenes I was observing, building a mountain from scratch because Vero didn’t have one or developing another unique structure that has had a long and useful life, all took place when he was in his 70s! More on that later.

After he died when I was fourteen, I expanded my life and connection to him by going to work in the Driftwood kitchen on Saturday and Sundays, 6 AM to 4 PM. I made a dollar an hour and was the richest kid I knew with the $20 paycheck. Beginning with running the dishwasher and working my way up the line through salads and sandwiches to becoming the expediter, the assistant to M.L. the chef. That job is about issuing the orders, coordinating the dishes of the order for pickup and garnishing. It’s very good training for becoming organized. The Driftwood is where I really learned how to cook and be efficient. When M.L. called in sick one day, I volunteered to do his work to the amazement of the waitresses who were sure the day would a disaster, without M.L. and pancake batter, a critical part of the breakfast service. One of them came over on my side of the kitchen, which was not acceptable, and grabbed the almost empty pancake batter pot. What are we going to do?”

My 15 year-old self stood up to her 40-year old self and said, “I know how to make it.” She said “How? There is no written recipe,” I said, “I have watched him do it.” She went back to her side but kept her eye on me as I lined up the ingredients and added them to the stainless steel pot without measuring cups or spoons, just the way M.L. did it. No one could tell a difference in my pancakes. The other feather in my chef hat was my fried chicken on Sundays when I stood in for M.L. Nana ate lunch there after church and was so proud of me for the fried chicken I made. These days changed my life. What I felt was the first taste of competency in an adult world, far away from the classroom or the library where I excelled, and it was exhilarating. I liked cooking.

My day jobs over the last 40 years have included waitressing, bartending, office management,  financial services product manager, catering, selling cookbooks, editing cookbooks, free lance writing, web site content manager, and the senior editor of a commercial web site dedicated to home cooking.

Before blogging was popular, I was reviewing cookbooks and writing about entertaining and wine tasting for a wine organization, The Enological Society and on my personal web site with the tagline Cooking and Reading Every Day. I still have the blog. You can read it on my web site and know everything I read and cook. So those are my credentials to have the audacity to think I could write a novel about cooking and other things.

When I reached the point where I realized I finally had the time to write my own book after working on so many other peoples books, I didn’t want to write a memoir. I agree with the poet Mary Oliver who said, “The world is full of sad stories but I don’t want to tell one.” I wanted to write something I’d like to read -- about cooking, wine, traveling. It would be a story about smart people who were  my age, a husband that was a good guy -- and no sociopathic serial murders.

My first novel was a joy to write, The Cooking Class in Kuala Lumpur. I waited a bit after I finished it to see if anybody else enjoyed the story and the characters.  A bunch of people did so I thought I’m going to take this one step further and try to put all I learned on the first into the second. I’m proud of The Cooking Class in San Sebastián. It features all the stuff I like: love and lust, intelligent characters, exciting travel, food and wine, art and parties.

The CCSS is a modern story about falling in love late in life, which shares the exhilaration and terror of falling in love at any age, but is different from first love. Has anybody here experienced falling in love late in life? Where there any complications with children or friends? Were you surprised by the reaction of kids, friends or relatives? Have you read other stories about this situation?

The characters include Laurence, a 76-year-old retired Boeing engineer who is intrigued with Eva, a 70-year-old CEO he meets at the gallery. She is hosting a fundraising event in the gallery to publicize her Italian import business. Eva is a savvy business woman. Drew respects and values her opinion. She’s powerful in all aspects if her life and keeps everyone around her alert.

Drew, a 55-year old art gallery owner, inspired by Amy and Kevin's vacation in the Basque country decides to risk his reputation by staging a Basque art exhibition to keep his gallery alive. It's probably a brilliant idea but the work of sourcing the art is challenging and nerve wracking.

Why San Sebastian and the Basque Country?

Raise your hand if you’ve been to Basque Country.  Then you all know it’s the beautiful, southern part of France and Northern Spain bordered by the Atlantic Ocean. The coast features fishing villages as well as glamorous resorts for the rich, famous and royal. The Pyrenees Mountains and fertile valleys form another border and produce exceptional vegetables and sheep. It’s fun to travel there. San Sebastian is a beautiful city on the bay. The food is amazing, the restaurant and bar scene is vibrant. There are many Michelin star restaurants and of course cooking classes! The culture is fascinating, the history is enormous. This is also a serious international art scene anchored by the Guggenheim Bilbao with a galaxy of art galleries. All this is the homeland of The Basques for thousands of years. They are a most unusual people. They are tenacious about their traditions and culture. They didn’t immigrate from anywhere.  They’ve always been there.

Seattle also plays a role in the story. Several of my readers said I should contact the chamber of commerce of Seattle, Bellingham and Lopez Island for my portrait of these communities. There’s a lot going on in the story. Each character in their own way is fighting for a life that’s meaningful to them.

Taking pleasure in cooking, eating, working, and traveling are all part what I learned growing up in Vero Beach with Waldo at the helm.

And now you see how those pleasures translate into my new novel, CCSS. I hope you enjoy reading it and that it will inspire you to have friends over to talk and laugh about the challenges of this crowd in Seattle. I hope also that you, like me, will take inspiration from Waldo to stay engaged in whatever you enjoy doing, no matter how old you are. You’ve been such a good audience.

Does anyone have a question about anything?

March 27, 2019