

This is a story about a woman I met almost 35 years ago. Mary Ann Karpuk, a person who a few years later became my mother in law. My first impression of Mary Ann was that she was a giving person, someone who wanted what was best for others rather than herself. I have this impression because the very first meal I ate at their house, she wanted to know what my favorite meal was, because she was going to prepare it for me, regardless of what she or her husband might have wanted.

Mary Ann passed away just before Christmas this year, and it was both a blessing and a tragedy. It was a blessing because after 88 wonderful years on this earth her health was failing considerably, and she will no longer have to suffer in a human body. It was a tragedy because she was an example to us all on how to live a good, meaningful, faith filled life. History will probably not remember much about Mary Ann because she lived her life in what contemporary society would say is a non-descript manner. She did not write any books, make a splash on TV and probably didn't even care about the internet. What she did was devote her life to her family, making sure each of her six children learned the daily lessons she was teaching, subtly and not so subtly.

The only surviving child of Lithuanian immigrants, she grew up on a farm just outside of Sioux City. She took a job as a bookkeeper at Toy National Bank, which is where she worked when she married Joe, her husband of 66 years. Ironically, Toy National Bank is the place where I got my start as a banker! That bank has subsequently been sold, but I guarantee you it had nothing to do with either me or Mary Ann. After the birth of their first son, Mary Ann quit the bank to take on a different full time job, raising a family with Joe.

Obviously I was not around to observe how this family functioned for the first 30 or so years, but I have heard story after story of how Mary Ann worked for the benefit of others. She seemed to understand her role as the primary caregiver, worker and teacher. Joe was always the head of the house, but Mary Ann ran the house. Don't get me wrong, she was not a saint and there are many stories of her losing her temper.

As small business owners and managers, we need all levels of employees to help make our companies function properly. The truth is not everyone can be the boss, nor does everyone want to be the boss. We need workers who are willing to come to work every day, to the very best they can do at their jobs and not worry about the higher level decisions. Please don't get me wrong, these people are very smart, and often very capable of making decisions. Like Mary Ann they choose to live their work lives in service to others.

Our businesses cannot function without everyone doing their jobs. Most often those workers who perform the "mundane" tasks of getting the basic work done are our most valuable resources, and we fail to tap that resource. I really like the idea behind the CBS series "Undercover Boss" and believe that bosses should do more to understand how things work on the ground level, and appreciate those who work the entry level jobs.

Mary Ann gave us a model of how hard work and service to others can lead to a very fulfilling and great life. Her 6 children, 28 grandchildren and 24 great, grandchildren are a testament to her faith, values and the way she lived every day.

*Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.*