

Everyone called her Lala

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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[This is Bishop Paul Marshall's December column for secular newspapers, usually 600 words or less and different from his column in Diocesan Life. The column is sent to newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by [The Morning Call](#), Allentown, on the first Saturday of every month. It usually appears also in six or seven additional papers at some point during the month. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is about 400,000. Some 120 columns have been published over the past eleven years. If your newspaper does not publish the column and you might consider speaking with the editor about that, please email [Bill Lewellis](#).]

Everyone called her Lala.

Few people have shown me so unselfconsciously how what we believe looks like when it works. With the humility and genuine kindness that only truly beautiful souls can muster, she did many kinds of good where you get your hands dirty.

Born 1919 in Chile, she was educated there and in England. During World War II, she worked in Chile on specialty coding and decoding for the British Navy and British Security Coordination. She married Edward Leach, a mining engineer working there for Bethlehem Steel.

They came to the United States in 1954. While her husband continued his career, Lala raised seven children, drew countless friends to her, and, through fulltime volunteer work, became a friend to so many.

Victoria Leach died in November.

Lala decoded the central truth of her religion: God became incarnate – in Jesus, God got close to humanity, and people changed. When we choose to get closer to those who are in need, one-on-one, we and they are changed together.

She once told me of coming to Bethlehem in the 1950s as a busy and distracted young mother and corporate wife, and having her life change because a priest from the Cathedral Church of the Nativity invited her to consider whether it was time for her to try church again.

We who knew Lala know how important church became to her. She didn't just go to church; she worked on her spiritual development in a disciplined way. Lala proved to many that we can be holy without being fake. She helped others reconnect with their spiritual center.

Many today, because of cultural shifts or personal issues, find themselves as spiritually disconnected as Lala once did. Some who read this may hear a gentle suggestion, that it may be time for them to try to find a spiritual center again.

I once administered Holy Communion to Lala in Spanish, leading to a long conversation about worship resources in Spanish. She wondered if I could tell her where to find a Spanish version of the hymn, "Fight the Good Fight" (Hymn 552 in the 1982 Episcopal Hymnal). It led us on a merry chase through modern Spanish hymnals. It also produced the story in that beautifully modest voice of hers that I continue to hear in my mind, of how that hymn had been her song and prayer during a battle for her life.

It's a useful text. We are aware of the parts of us that feel a little bit entitled, a little bit picked on when things become difficult. Lala had a different attitude. Her battle hymn suggests that when life gets difficult, you're playing in the Super Bowl. It's tough and the stakes are high; still, nobody complains about being picked for the Super Bowl. They make their best effort.

There is now a mountain of data about how the body, mind, and spirit work together. Before that mountain existed, there was Lala, conquering the assault on her body by disciplining her spirit.

Though Lala did not seek praise, she was honored on many occasions for her work in community, hospital and education. If you visit Lehigh Valley newspaper websites and search on her name, you will see what I mean.

In quiet and direct ways throughout her life, making the connection between what we say and do, she has been a model of how compassion and firmness of conviction can coexist in one life with authenticity.

Walking out of St. Luke's Hospital the night Lala died, I found myself saying to one of her neighbors that knowing Lala was a gift, but I felt profoundly sad.

[The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at www.diobeth.org.]