

# VINE & BRANCH

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## In Remembrance:

# Dr. Nancy Hightower

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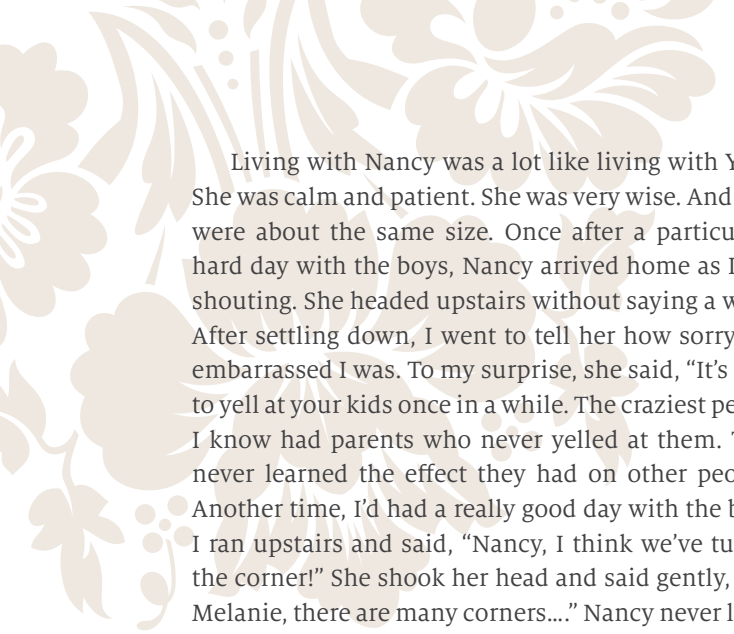
By Melanie Hightower

I met Nancy Hightower when her son Lee and I started dating 22 years ago. We spent weekends with Nancy and her husband Ralph at Heath Ranch, the family homestead in Madisonville, where she and I would sit on the porch and talk as the sun went down. Before Nancy became my mother-in-law, she became my friend. Nine years ago, I started working at River Oaks Baptist School, and then Nancy became my boss. So I had the joy and privilege of seeing many aspects of Nancy's life, but my favorite was being part of her family.

Nancy cherished her family, and we all knew it. She remembered every birthday. She accepted each of us unconditionally. And she put her family's needs ahead of her own. When her daughter Elizabeth's husband was ill and in the ICU, Nancy dropped everything and flew to California without being asked. For ten days, she took care of Elizabeth's kids, got them to school, and helped with homework so her daughter could stay at the hospital. It didn't matter to Nancy that it was the first two weeks of a new school year—always a busy time in the life of a school. She stayed as long as she was needed. Nancy was completely devoted to her children.

Nancy's grandchildren were the light of her life. As the proud grandmother of eight grandsons, Nancy attended many a sports event and not a single ballet recital. She was happiest when the entire family was together, and she delighted in hosting festive parties for those she loved most. Nancy made holidays magical, with an exquisitely set table and decorations for every season. After dinner, the boys would tumble outside to her beautiful backyard lined with wisteria, azaleas, gardenias, and tea roses. It was the perfect place for Easter egg hunts and football games. (Many times, the youngest grandson was the football.)

When it came to mothers-in-law, I won the jackpot, because Nancy embraced those of us who married into the family as if we were her own. In fact, I liked Nancy so much that after Ralph died, she came to live with us for five years. She would stay in our upstairs apartment during the week and return to Madisonville on weekends. I was home with two young sons at the time, and they were a handful. All of us were waiting for Nancy to get home from work. Some days, the boys would run upstairs, and she would read them a book. Some days, I would run upstairs, and she would pour me a glass of wine.



Living with Nancy was a lot like living with Yoda. She was calm and patient. She was very wise. And they were about the same size. Once after a particularly hard day with the boys, Nancy arrived home as I was shouting. She headed upstairs without saying a word. After settling down, I went to tell her how sorry and embarrassed I was. To my surprise, she said, “It’s okay to yell at your kids once in a while. The craziest people I know had parents who never yelled at them. They never learned the effect they had on other people.” Another time, I’d had a really good day with the boys. I ran upstairs and said, “Nancy, I think we’ve turned the corner!” She shook her head and said gently, “Oh, Melanie, there are many corners...” Nancy never let us get too high or too low. She kept us centered.

Nancy also kept us moving forward. She did not believe in resting on laurels. When anyone in our family achieved something significant, her typical reaction was, “What are you going to do next?” Nancy expected no less of herself. She led by example. When Nancy was 39, she was diagnosed with a chronic and painful condition that would affect her the rest of her life. She had to give up many things she loved like playing tennis and running and playing the piano. It was a bitter pill to swallow. It took nine months for her to accept her new normal, and then she made plan B. For ten years, she went to school at night—while working at ROBS during the day—to earn a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction with a focus on special education, followed by a doctorate degree in educational psychology. She became certified as an educational diagnostician and licensed as a clinical psychologist. That effort and grit paved the way for Nancy to become head of school. When God closes one door, He opens another.

So while many people saw Nancy as visionary, they may not have seen how incredibly tough and determined she was. This special combination was the engine that propelled ROBS to such success. Nancy had a clear vision: She believed that to prepare children to lead successful and satisfying lives, they needed to become complete people. They needed an outstanding academic foundation and a strong moral compass. In fact, she thought these two things were completely inseparable—that inner traits such as patience, self-control, joy, and even love were essential to learning.

Nancy served as ROBS’ head of school for 22 years until her retirement in 2012. During that time, she viewed her role as fulfilling the Lord’s plan for the School and enabling those around her to use their gifts to the fullest. Her headship transformed the School. What colleagues remember most was

Nancy’s tireless push to elevate academic excellence and professionalism at ROBS. As a result, the School increased in size and stature to become one of the premier schools in the region, and Nancy came to be regarded as one of the finest educators in Houston. Nancy considered ROBS’ students and graduates the soul of her professional legacy. While the accolades and honors ROBS received over the years are a testament to Nancy’s leadership, she was always quick to give credit to others: the School’s dedicated faculty, staff, administrators, trustees, parents, grandparents, and members of River Oaks Baptist Church, all surrounded by an abundance of God’s grace. As she liked to say, “When people work very hard for a purpose that glorifies God, He joins them.”

Being head of school is a difficult and sometimes lonely job. It’s impossible to make everyone happy. A few years ago after one of Houston’s big storms, the School was closed for several days. When it reopened, a first grader approached Nancy and said, “Dr. Hightower, my dad said if you closed school for one more day, he was going to drop me off at your house.” I think this story shows how confident our students are—and how approachable Nancy was. Perhaps that’s because at the start of the school day, she spoke to students, faculty, and staff alike through her memorable daily devotionals. Each morning long before dawn, Nancy wrote a relevant, heartfelt, Christ-centered message to the School. These devotionals, delivered over the PA system, offered a window into her soul. Everyone at ROBS knew what mattered to her, even the children. One day, a visitor asked a young student for directions to the Chapel. He replied, “If you’re looking for God, you should go to Dr. Hightower’s office. I think He hangs out there.”

Even after Nancy retired, ROBS was often on her mind. She had seen the renderings for the new Middle School building, and she was excited for our future. As Nancy said towards the end of her career, “In the future, there are sure to be opportunities that none of us can foresee, and the only way to seize them will be to think big.” Yes, Nancy kept us moving forward.

Last but not least, Nancy kept us humble. She would have said that every good thing that happened in her life was a blessing from God. She would have insisted that the School’s achievements are *your* achievements, not hers. She would have said she was a work in progress. But we know:

Nancy was a masterpiece.

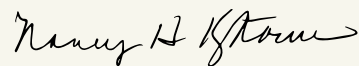
*Melanie Hightower is the Director of Communications & Community Initiatives.*

*Until we meet again...*

*Summer is nearly upon us, and soon members of the ROBS community will be dispersing for vacation, camp, and other adventures. Children are restless and eager for summer break...and so are some of the grown-ups. Students and families we love will be heading on to high school; others will be moving farther away. The end of the school year is always emotional. It makes us so aware of the passage of time.*

*At the end of May, after the final bell has rung and our halls are quiet, our faculty and staff gather one last time for a service of appreciation. It is a time when we thank God for His many blessings this year—for watching over us and providing abundantly for us. As many of us prepare to go separate ways, it has become our custom at ROBS to say “see you later” rather than “goodbye.” It represents our deepest hope and prayer that soon, through the grace of God, we will be together again.*

*Godspeed,*



*Nancy H. Hightower, Ed.D.*

*Excerpt from Dr. Nancy Hightower's letter to the ROBS community, May 2011*