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## Problem lady's problems

By CAROL FELSENTHAL  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

Seven months ago, on a glorious Saturday afternoon in June, Eppie Lederer died an excruciatingly painful death from cancer alone in her bedroom with no one to comfort her except a hired caregiver.

Eppie, born Esther Pauline Friedman but better known as Ann Landers, was still at the top of her game as the world's most revered and, she claimed, most widely syndicated advice columnist.

Eppie could pick up the telephone and talk to the President of the United States, a U.S. senator, a Fortune 500 CEO. And they called for advice, for fun. Bill Clinton asked her if he had been ruined by Monica Lewinsky. Walter Annenberg pretended to be a disgruntled reader. Her friends included Walter Cronkite, Warren Buffett, Barbara Walters, Kirk Douglas and Helen Hayes. And she was a flawless friend, counseling them on life's problems large and small. A friend who was sick could count on a daily call.

Her fans sensed that she had the real stuff, and she eventually garnered 90 million readers in 1,200 papers and a prime spot in her hometown Chicago Tribune.

And yet, she somehow could never apply the sensible advice she gave others to the closest relations in her own life.

Her husband, Jules, the founder of Budget Rent-a-Car, left her for a younger woman. And although Eppie and her twin sister, who would become the advice columnist Abigail van Buren, had once been inseparable, they feuded for years and reconciled only late in life.

Eppie's relationship with her daughter, Margo (who would not comment for this article), was seldom smooth. In the 1990s, Eppie's closest companion, a Chicago priest, was forced to end the relationship because aspects of it troubled Margo.

Like the shoemaker's daughter who has holes in her shoes, Eppie, an adviser to millions, seemed unable to confront problems in her own family. She encouraged



her readers and her friends to tackle their problems head-on, but when hers hit too close to home and complicated her relationship with her husband or her daughter, she simply averted her eyes.

A 5-foot 2-inch, blue-eyed, dimpled dynamo, with her bosomy figure coaxed into form-fitting suits, her face painted to perfection, and her dark hair already sprayed into her signature flip, Eppie believed that she was destined for something big. Her opportunity came in 1954, when she tried out for the job of Ann Landers, then the Chicago Sun-Times' advice columnist. (Eppie later moved to the Chicago Tribune.)

Although her journalism experience was limited to a college gossip column that she had written with her twin, Eppie managed to mimic the witty and sharp style the original Ann Landers, Ruth Crowley, had pioneered.

She clinched the job with her performance on a psychological profile compiled on all the applicants. Larry Fanning, later the editor of the Sun-Times, told colleagues that "Eppie was off the scale on aggressiveness, that the company that they hired to administer the test said she had a higher score than anybody they had ever tested."

Fanning, who died in 1971, recognized that the column could become a huge moneymaker and saw that Eppie Lederer could make that happen. She was a self-promoter; all he had to do was teach her how to write an advice column.

Eppie's success led to a bitter split with her identical twin, Pauline Esther, known as Popo. In the earliest months of her job, Eppie started sending readers' letters to Popo, who was living in California with two children and a staff of servants. Popo wrote answers in a voice that mimicked the one that Eppie had been coached to adopt, and she did it so well that no one knew. When Fanning found out, he explained to Eppie that running Popo's responses under Ann Landers's name was unethical.

Eppie stopped collaborating with her sister, but by then Popo was hooked. She marched over to the San Francisco Chronicle and sold the editors on a competing column. For years afterward, the twins didn't speak.

Although the sisters had denounced each other in magazine articles over the years, they gradually reached a kind of truce. By the early 1990s, as Popo began to show signs of Alzheimer's and her daughter, Jeanne Phillips, took over the writing of the "Dear Abby" column, they stayed in touch.

"Eppie told me they faxed every day," says one close friend, "and if Popo would not answer, Eppie would take a piece of fax paper and write, 'Popo, put your paw print on this and send it back.' Popo would draw something on it and send it back."

#### **Family ties**

With both parents absorbed in their work, the Lederers' only child had grown up indulged and directionless. Margo left Brandeis University without graduating to marry a Bostonian, John Coleman, who went on to develop such small but

sophisticated Chicago hotels as the Tremont and the Whitehall. Seven years and three children later, the marriage broke up.

That same year, 1970, Margo began to write a column for the Chicago Tribune. She was pretty, stylish and bold, with a sharp, sarcastic tongue.

Eppie rarely mentioned Margo in her column — in later years, she sometimes inserted a "confidential" birthday greeting to her "darling daughter" — but she did write tributes to her wonderful husband and best friend, Jules. Indeed, her carefully paced personal revelations cemented her ties to readers.

In 1982, Margo published "Eppie," her sometimes affectionate, sometimes biting biography of her mother. The book portrays Eppie as controlling and so obsessed with Margo's appearance as a little girl that she rouged her lips and applied peroxide to her hair.

"Father thought I was blond until I was in my teens," Margo wrote. "When someone would remark on what a beautiful child I was, Mother would demur and respond, 'Oh, we don't care about that. What matters is that she's a nice girl.' Oh, really? What I finally figured out was that good looks were important but you should deny them, or at least pretend they didn't count."

Eppie's marriage was slowly unraveling. "They were physically not in the same city at the same time very often," recalls Charles Laff, a close friend of both Eppie and Jules. "They were both so busy being who they were as individuals, they ceased being who they were as husband and wife."

In 1960, with a cousin of Eppie's in Los Angeles, Jules had started Budget Rent-a-Car and he traveled nonstop, often abroad, expanding the business to England, Mexico and elsewhere.

When he wasn't working, he wanted Eppie to relax with him. But she didn't have time. He called her the "general manager of the world," and he was only half kidding. Jules bought a weekend house in Michigan, but she and the outdoors beyond Michigan Ave. didn't mix.

Jules also bought a small house in London and used it frequently while running Budget. He suggested to Eppie that they make the house their home, that she could write from anywhere. But she liked her adopted city in the middle of the country.

In 1968, Jules sold Budget to Trans-America. He was given a five-year contract, and by 1973 he was out. He had always been a heavy drinker and smoker, but with his reduced business role, both habits grew worse. Eppie finally took note of what others had known for a long time: Jules was an alcoholic.

She recognized it, she told Martin Janis, a close friend and escort, only when Jules' secretary called and told her that Jules was drunk by 10 in the morning. In August 1972 in London, Jules met a registered nurse 28 years his junior, Elizabeth Morton. He hated to eat alone, and dinners with Elizabeth soon led to more intimate pursuits.

One day in 1975, Eppie called one of her closest friends, University of Notre

Dame president Theodore Hesburgh. "I just learned from Jules that he has been seeing a lady in London," she said. "I'm devastated. I must talk to you." En route to South Bend, she wrote a draft of the famous column in which she told the world that she was getting divorced.

The divorce from Jules, as well as Margo's multiple marriages—the third was outside her religion, to the actor Ken Howard—forced Eppie to change her views. Life was not neat and predictable, she understood.

### Questionable views

On homosexuality, she moved from believing that it was a choice that people should try to correct to believing that if one's child is gay or lesbian, that is the way God made them and parents ought to love and accept them.

But there were some issues on which her personal views remained stuck in the past, and she avoided them in her column. In a tribute to Eppie after her death, the Sun-Times columnist Mary Mitchell, who is African-American, wrote of going to Eppie's for tea. "She looked at me with a devilish twinkle in her eye and asked whether I only dated black men.... 'Yes, I only date black men,' I said emphatically, afraid she was about to turn into a matchmaker. 'Good,' she said. 'I always say, "Stick to your own kind." Marriage is hard enough. Why do people want to bring that kind of trouble on themselves?'"

Journalist Lois Wille, who had recently been hired for a high-level editorial position at the Chicago Tribune, recalls Eppie questioning her in 1991 about an African-American who had recently been hired for a high-level editorial position. "She said he seemed like a very fine man. ... 'Is it true his wife is white?' she asked. 'I know this is wrong, but it just kind of bothers me to see a black person and a white person together. Does that bother you?' I said, 'No, it doesn't.'"

Ken Howard remembers being surprised to hear his mother-in-law use the terms "shvartzer" and "shvartzeh" for African-Americans. He called her on it, saying it was pejorative. "No, darling," she replied, "it means 'black.'" Once Howard showed her the definition, he says, "she made it a point never to use that term again."

Eppie, who was raised Jewish, had always been drawn to Catholicism. "We're neighbors," she told Joseph Cardinal Bernardin on first meeting him, and she encouraged him to stop by for tea. The next Sunday he did, and he asked her for \$100,000 for Big Shoulders, which funds urban Catholic schools. "I'm not going to give you \$100,000," Eppie replied. "I'll give you \$50,000."

Toward the end of her life, Eppie's deepening friendship with a Jesuit priest, a handsome man 25 years her junior, caused perhaps the greatest tension in her relationship with Margo. One friend says that Margo worried about her mother's reputation. But others counter that she was mostly concerned that Eppie would leave money to the church. (The priest has asked not to be identified.)

Through the priest, Eppie became close to the city's top Jesuits. In 1997, she was asked to join the development executive board of the Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus. But then, early in 2000, she was asked to resign. Her friends say

that it was because Margo had called the priest's superiors and complained, suggesting something unsavory about the friendship. Eppie was devastated. She was accustomed to being asked to serve on boards; she had never been asked to leave one.


**A solitary end**

In January 2002, Eppie went into the Loyola University Medical Center and learned that she had multiple myeloma of the spine, a cancer of the bone marrow. If she fought it aggressively, she was told, she could expect to live two years. She decided to forgo the conventional chemotherapy. Her ground rules were that she die at home in as little pain as possible and that the doctor come to her.

On June 22, Eppie, 83, died with only the hired caregiver at her side. She had said repeatedly that the column would die with her, and it did.

*Excerpted from an article that originally appeared in the February 2003 Chicago magazine.*

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