

# Mother & Daughter Launched Their “*Second Acts*” Together At Mercy

Ruth Rivera, B.A. '10, M.S. '14 lived a life defined by self-reliance. Coming to New York from Puerto Rico at the age of five, she was soon split up from her four siblings following the divorce of her parents and entered the foster care system. “It was not an easy start in life for her,” said her daughter, Alexandra Day, B.A. '10, B.S. '10, M.B.A. '16. Shortly after graduating high school at 18 years old, Rivera left her longest standing foster home placement and never looked back.

As a necessity, Rivera sought opportunities to support herself and somehow found her way into acting. Whether she landed there through a trademark sparkling smile, or by sheer luck, she began pursuing print commercial work and modeling gigs, booking jobs that would take her abroad. For a young woman with essentially no blood relatives to rely on, this would seem an exciting adventure, but Day said her mother took such opportunities all in stride.

“Mom was very practical about the whole thing,” said Day. “If it was glamorous to everybody else, for mom it was just a way to pay the bills.” Rivera would soon find herself moving into television and film. Small roles in now iconic films like *The Godfather Part II* and *Saturday Night Fever* would lead Ruth to larger roles, including one in the NBC made-for-television movie, *Contract on Cherry Street*, with Frank Sinatra.

Making a Broadway debut in 1977 in the play *Cold Storage*, she joined a cast that included Len Cariou. It was clear hers was a career on the rise. However, anticipating the short shelf-life of an actress, Rivera looked ahead to something more and began taking college courses. Soon, both higher education goals and a life on the stage and screen would soon take a back seat toward another priority – impending motherhood.

“She stepped back from acting because she didn’t want me shuffled around,” said Day, who was born shortly before the end of her parents’ relationship. As a single mother, Rivera re-oriented her life to one that better suited a young daughter, taking jobs that afforded more stability than those of a working actress. Soon, she exchanged the thrilling clamor of film sets for a series of jobs behind a desk.

Mother and daughter became

Ruth Rivera with daughter Alexandra Day at the 2016 Mercy College commencement ceremony.

Photo provided by Alexandra Day

inextricably close throughout Day's upbringing. "Sometimes we were more like sisters than anything," said Day. It was this closeness that would lead mother and daughter to Mercy as a place to pivot both of their lives. Then in her 50s, Rivera enrolled first. "Mom just always likes to finish what she started," said Day. At 25, Day soon felt the subtle pressure to finish her own abandoned college goal and considered the sacrifices her mom had made for her. Day was powerless in the grip of a mother's desire to see her child obtain her diploma. "I can remember her saying, 'Am I going to get my degree before you do?'" recalls Day.

Mother and daughter would earn their bachelor's degrees together, both graduating in 2010. "It was such a cool experience to be at each other's graduations, so emotional for both of us," said Day. She and her mother would also both go on to earn their master's degrees at Mercy, with Rivera ultimately signing on as an adjunct faculty member, teaching basic communications classes through the School of Business. These courses were a perfect fit for a woman with a background in acting, said Diana Juettner, chair of the Social Sciences Department.

"Ruth had many different life perspectives to offer the Mercy students she taught," said Juettner. "Having known Mercy, first as a non-traditional student, then as a graduate student, she reached her students on a different level." Juettner said she embodied the type of success story that Mercy is all about – leveraging education to reinvent one's life.

"In fact, Ruth was really a master of reinventing her life. She made it look effortless somehow," said Ellen Sperber, associate professor of psychology, who knew Rivera as first a graduate assistant tapped for her potential as an adjunct, then as a colleague. Sperber, who considered Ruth a close friend, said her humility, deep faith and dedication was evident in everything she did. Sperber, who, like many of the Mercy staff had no knowledge of Rivera's



Ruth Rivera (second from right) in television scene with Frank Sinatra.

life before, recalled one visit to her apartment where she spotted a glamorous modeling shot and finally coaxed the story out of her. "She saw that as just one chapter of her life," added Sperber.



Ruth Rivera

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In 2016, Rivera relocated to Alabama to be near Day, who had taken a job with the federal government. It was an easy decision as mother and daughter had never been more than a short drive from one another. Rivera shifted her Mercy duties to online instruction, but sadly, Rivera received a cancer diagnosis

a few months after the move. It was not her first time with cancer, said Day, and Rivera was never one to back down from any obstacle. Resolute, she continued teaching through chemotherapy and many phases of treatments, with Juettner helping to fill in for Rivera when needed. It was a testament to what Rivera felt Mercy helped give her. In December 2019, at age 73, she passed away from the disease.

In the year since her death, colleagues have remembered her fondly – occasionally emailing a YouTube link of a movie scene they caught her in, wistfully evoking a mysterious secret past their beloved colleague rarely discussed. Yet, for all who knew Rivera, it is her kindness they remember her for. "She was devoted to everything she put her mind to in life, particularly at Mercy," said Sperber.

Day now looks back on her coinciding mother-daughter education journey at Mercy as a time in her life she will never forget, seeing her mother's triumph at college late in life as a spark that fed her own fire. Between the two women, a combined five Mercy degrees symbolize a joint tale of reinvention.

Day, now serving as a benefit authorizer training instructor for the Social Security Administration, draws inspiration from her mom in her daily work. "Mentoring our trainees is kind of like teaching a class, so in a way my mom is with me," she said.

"Mercy gave me a way to be myself," said Day, "and perhaps it was that for my mom too, it was a place where we both were nurtured."