

Debbie's husband gently woke her, urging her to go to the basement, where she found water lapping at the top step and hundreds of cookbooks and an antique card catalogue filled with recipes floating below her. A passionate cook and avid recipe collector, Debbie had spent decades amassing a collection of thousands of cookbooks, recipe cards, clippings and cooking magazines, all lovingly stored in her basement, dubbed The Culinary Cellar. On a stormy Chicago night, when the retention pond near Debbie's suburban home overflowed, was destroyed. "I couldn't speak, move or even cry at first," says Debbi.

Upon hearing the news, Debbie's daughter, Kristina, flew in from New York. "Once it was safe to go into the basement, Kristina, who arrived with a broken heart and rubber boots on, worked herself to the bone, overseeing the professionals cleaning up," says Debbie.

"She saved everything she could, and we spread it out on the driveway to dry. In the end, a dumpster was filled with 10 tons of everything I had collected for over 50 years, including my grandmother's Fannie Mae cookbook from 1914 and many antiques. It was devastating."

After neighbors and friends heard the news, cookbooks began arriving. Inspired, Kristina posted photos of the flood along with her mom's story on Facebook, explaining that the cookbooks and recipes weren't "just things," but physical representations of her mom's soul.

"They were gems that she couldn't wait to share with anyone who needed just the right recipe. Her collection was a carefully curated resource library for home cooks and chefs alike," she wrote.

And when she asked for help, it poured in.

"I found boxes of cookbooks on my porch daily from people across the country and even overseas," says Debbie.

"I could feel the love in those boxes. The incredible kindness and generosity of friends, family, and strangers got me through the heartbreak and inspired me to rebuild my collection and continue my blog."

A year later, Debbie and her husband are still rebuilding and in awe of others' generosity. "When your passion is sharing recipes with others, it finds a way to come full circle," says Kristina.

"So many people know my mom as the award-winning cook who gladly shares recipes along with a smile. Now all those smiles and recipes are coming back to her."

SIDEBAR

Share the Recipe Love/Pass It On

Debbie has always enjoyed sharing recipes, passing them along to anyone who asked and requesting them from those around her. "I've been collecting recipes since I was 12, getting them from family members, the cafeteria ladies, my friends' moms and anyone else willing to share."

While she can't name a favorite cookbook - "I love them all," she says - it may end up being her daughter Kristina's upcoming cookbook devoted to Finnish cuisine.

"Our love of cooking is like a family legacy," explains Debbie, who, along with her grandmother, mom, great aunt and daughters, regularly entered cooking contests.

The recipes here are staples in the Vanni house, and the chowders' a prizewinner. "I'm so happy to share my recipes with the Taste of Home readers," says Debbie, "especially since several field editors shared cookbooks with me."

*Written by FindWritersOnline.com writer: **erussell726***