

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

April 10, 2015

Column #24

Bonnie Schumaker

lovely sea bird
dips her wing in the wave
we drop anchor
rising from the spindrift
a rainbow too soon leaves us

Neal Whitman



LAST CIRCLE-UP FOR BONNIE **Formerly Homeless I-HELP Hostess Dies At Sixty** **By Wanda Sue Parrott**

WHEN WE CIRCLED up for dinner on Sun., March 29 at Unitarian Universalist Church of the Monterey Peninsula, an I-HELP guest noted the absence of a regular hostess and asked. “Where’s Bonnie?”

I-HELP, an acronym for Interfaith Homeless Emergency Lodging Program, has provided food and shelter consistently for more than 21 years at houses of worship in Monterey County, where a homecooked dinner is served and sleeping accommodations are given to between 25 and 30 homeless men. At UUCMP, I-HELP night is the second (and fifth) Sunday of the month and Bonnie always arrived early.

Our ritual starts by greeting the men as they unload the I-HELP bus and carry their sleeping bags into the sanctuary, piling them in the center. We form a circle like scouts at a campfire, sometimes holding hands or joining in personal silence during which a church member offers an invocation, and an I-HELP participant follows with a few words of prayerful gratitude or blessing for the meal. We usually know each other by first names only.

When it’s my turn to lead a circle-up session, I deliver a short non-sectarian group chant, folk song like “Kumbaya” or a fast do-it-yourself yodel. I-HELP committee member Neal Whitman, a Pacgroviaan and award-winning poet, usually delivers one or two 3-line haiku or 5-line tanka poems like the one he shared at Bonnie’s memorial (see photo caption).

A bond develops from circle-ups as hosts and guests become friendly over time. And so, the gentleman from I-HELP asked, “Where’s Bonnie?” to which Bonnie’s dear friend Gretchen Nicholas, who has headed the I-HELP meals for men team at UUCMP since I joined three years ago, replied, “I guess she isn’t feeling well.”

After a member of our I-HELP committee delivered that night’s invocation, we lined up to fill our plates with roasted chicken, turkey meatloaf, beef stew, potato salad, veggies, and dip, and enjoyed a great indoor picnic, unaware that Bonnie was in Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula on life support after choking on a piece of meat less than 24 hours earlier.

As the sun slipped toward night, Bob Sadler remained to photograph some of the newer men in the I-HELP program. The rest of us left shortly before 7 p.m., not expecting to meet again for two weeks. Instead, phone calls and e-mail circulated on Wed., April 1.

Bonnie died? Bonnie Who? Oh, the I-HELP hostess. How? Choked to death! Is this an April Fool’s joke? No joke!

Bonnie's brain had been too deprived of oxygen to recover, and she was apparently in a coma while we circled up for I-HELP on Sunday. She was surrounded by loved ones who flew to Monterey when the life support plug was pulled, and her light went out on Wednesday.

A beautiful Celebration of the Life of Bonnie Stewart Gray Schumaker, hastily assembled by Rev. Dennis Hamilton and Caring Network members, was held at Unitarian Church of the Monterey Peninsula, 490 Aguajito Rd., Carmel on Fri., April 3, 2015, at 2 p.m.

In the foyer where we had dined with I-HELP three days earlier, a two-panel display now portrayed visions of Bonnie as a child, teen, art student, mother, and grandmother.

The program cover featured Bonnie as the I-HELP group knew her at 60, wearing her dark hair swept elegantly off her face, smiling from behind huge Jackie-Kennedy-size eyeglass frames. After filing off the bus and past Bonnie's photos, the I-HELP men formed a final circle-up for her around the back wall of the sanctuary as Rev. Dennis Hamilton introduced us to the Bonnie we didn't fully meet until after her transition.

"Bonnie Stewart Gray Schumaker was born right here in Carmel, on July 20, 1954. . . the youngest of three children, Alice, Frank and Bonnie. . . Her mother, Helen was artistically gifted, played organ for years at the Mayflower church in Pacific Grove."

Bonnie graduated from Monterey High School in 1972 and studied art before becoming a stewardess for United Airlines in 1978.

She married Daniel Schumaker, a UAL pilot, in 1979. They relocated to New Carlisle, Ind., where Tim and Sarah were born.

Rev. Hamilton continued: "The truth was that Bonnie and Daniel were like oil and water, Daniel, the practical one, Bonnie the romantic." Bonnie, a liberal in conservative Indiana, supported gay rights in the 1990s and belonged to the NAACP "They survived ten years and then divorced with joint custody. The children never lacked for love from either parent."

Before the divorce, Bonnie began to suffer from anxiety and irrational thoughts and was finally diagnosed with a late onset form of schizophrenia. Bonnie moved to Los Angeles in 2004, then back to the Monterey Peninsula in 2007. She was homeless for a while, living in her car.

Finally in 2011 she found the treatment and stability she needed at Interim, Inc., Monterey, whose program provided comfortable housing, social services and therapy that enabled Bonnie to convert from homelessness to hostess to the homeless men of I-HELP.

Bonnie Schumaker is an inspirational example of one whose absence inspires the unconditionally loving question, "Where is she?" by those who now know her last name.

In the near future, women like Bonnie who desperately deserve help in Monterey County might circle up and enjoy nightly meals indoors as the new I-HELP for Women program materializes in the image of I-HELP for Men.

I-HELP is Outreach Unlimited (OU), an IRS 501(c)3 nonprofit corporation, #383934212. OU is an interfaith charitable collaboration. The purpose of OU is to help those with inadequate housing or who are otherwise materially disadvantaged work toward becoming self-sufficient through a variety of services offered in a supportive and caring environment.

The I-HELP Leadership Group meets at 12p.m. on 2nd Thursdays at: First Presbyterian Church, 501 El Dorado, Monterey CA 93940. Meetings are open to all! 831-601-4564 or email wehelpihelp@gmail.com.

Meanwhile, the family requests that contributions in Bonnie's memory be made to Interim, Inc. Contact <http://www.interiminc.org/>.

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