

HOMELESS IN PARADISE
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IN OUR OWN BACKYARD - Part 48



Marla Dean, "Old Faithful" and a re-enactor/docent monk at the Roman Baths, Bath, England

A WHEELCHAIR NAMED 'OLD FAITHFUL' NEEDS A NEW HUMAN

By Wanda Sue Parrott

GIVING away her old wheelchair was so challenging that retired Latin teacher Marla Dean asked for our help. "If I want to give it to a needy person, do you know where I can donate it?" she emailed, preferring a homeless person get it.

"Unfortunately, during the Covid-19 crisis, agencies like Gathering for Women and I-Help have said they're not taking donations, other than financial contributions," I replied.

"Not even used medical equipment?"

"When I inquired about used clothing, including shoes, and personal feminine items for women, I learned that all donations, but money are off limits during Shelter in Place. Have you put it on Facebook or Next Door?"

"Someone on Next Door asked if anyone had a used wheelchair, but I got no response."

"OK," I said. "let's see what Cedar Street Times and Homeless in Paradise might do for you. What can you tell me about your wheelchair?" I was thinking about make, model, that sort of mundane thing.

"Its name is Old Faithful," Marla said. "We traveled the world together."

My reporter's nose twitched. "Tell me about it?"

Handicaps Couldn't Stop Her

Marla emailed: "I grew up just across the river from St. Louis in Hartford, Illinois. My abusive single mother said my father was dead. We were never homeless, but we survived on very little money, mostly Social Security and food stamps, in a house my father had built.

"When I discovered that I could graduate early, I applied for scholarships and got a great one to St. Louis University. I started college three weeks before my 17th birthday. I met Jeff that first week, too." She was 19 when they married. "I was teaching at age 20."

By the time she acquired Old Faithful in 2008, Marla and Jeff had raised four girls and one boy, and she faced retirement from neurological effects of an immune system condition. Jeff is a retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel now working as a civilian cyber security and data science expert.

Marla's Story Unfolds

"Once the kids were raised, I started accompanying him on his trips," Marla says. "We started taking the chair overseas when I received it in 2008. . . We got the chance to go overseas again in 2015.

"Our first destination was Molesworth AFB in England. . . Before leaving England, we spent a night at Bath, so that the old Latin teacher could tour the Roman ruins there. In London, I just had to see the statue of Boudica, the warrior queen who very nearly kicked a Roman Legion out of England.

"We took the express train through the Chunnel from London to Paris. That was when we found out that wheelchair users are treated as VIPs in Europe. Jeff would always buy the cheapest fare for the train, as allotted by his military orders. We were told to check in at the handicapped office. There, we would be upgraded to first class, since that is where wheelchair stowage and handicapped seating is on the train! . . .

"We spent a night in Paris just for fun. We strolled and wheeled down the Ave. des Champs-Elysees and rode up into the Eiffel Tower. Back at our hotel that night, we had cocktails at the rooftop bar and sat there watching the sparking lights come on that light up the tower at night. A fun and romantic side trip! (Photos L-R at the Eiffel Tower, Paris, & Colosseum, Rome.)



"We've traveled to Boston and to Nashville for Latin teacher conferences while I was teaching.

"Nashville has a perfect replica of the Parthenon, and the Latin teachers' conference-goers got to dress up in our togas and stolas for a cocktail party inside!"



Old Faithful Needs A New Home

Marla now has a new wheelchair and wants to share Old Faithful as a gift. She says,

"Remember when Michelle Obama said 'When you walk through a door of opportunity, don't close it behind you. Reach back and hold it open for the next person'? That is the way I feel.

“ . . . When I taught in a huge high school in San Antonio, I tried to encourage kids who thought they had no chance to go to college.

“They thought that I was some rich white lady who wouldn't understand, but I told them my story and kept pushing them. A few of them listened, and succeeded.

“That's what makes teaching worthwhile, right?”

Fact is, Marla found out at age 35 that her father was alive. Not only did she share his love for certain foods, he also loved to travel.

“As a kid from a poor background, I wound up with so much more than just a degree. I can ‘t wait to travel again and give my snazzy new chair a workout. My motto is: Have wheelchair, will travel.”

Old Faithful, anyone?

Salve, Marla

If you're interested in knowing more about Old Faithful, contact Marla Dean at marladeanad79@gmail.com

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Credits: Photos courtesy of Marla and Jeff Deane.

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About this Column: “Homeless in Paradise” is a free public service self-funded and produced by the author. During the Covid-19 pandemic, this column appears regularly on the last week of each month in the Cedar Street Times at www.cedarstreettimes.com (and as periodic FLASH columns).

It also appears on Facebook, in Next Door and on private email lists. If interested in being added to the list, submit your request to the contact info below.)

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