

DIANE O'CONNOR



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Introduction



I entered this world on January 14, 1950, and the story was retold often in my early years. Apparently, the day I arrived was a blustery, snowy winter day, and the wind actually grabbed my dad's hat and sent him running down the street to retrieve it!



1950

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In later years, I found out that my parents had lost a baby boy a couple years before I was born—and they almost lost me, too! The hospital had made a mistake typing my mom's blood—I was an RH baby like my older brother, but I was a tough little one and pushed my way through to life. The mistake was discovered and remedied for the future, but my parents actually lost another baby boy a few years after me, so I was a cherished child.

I was born on my maternal grandparents' anniversary, and share my birthday with two cousins on my dad's side! My cousin, Eileen was two years older, and Laura was born the same day as me—only in New York! I proudly told everyone that I had a “twin-cousin.”

When I was taking the final Touchstone Course for my Master's in Ministry Leadership through Rockbridge Seminary, one of our assignments was to create a board with post-its to notate events that shaped our lives—pink for positive events, blue for negative. We learned about the stages of life that God uses to shape His leaders, and we divided our post-its into categories with events we felt were part of “Sovereign Foundations, Inner Life work, Life Maturing, Ministry Maturing, Convergence, and Afterglow.” It was interesting to step back and see the big picture of all God was doing in my life! We also looked at each category, and used yellow post-its to record life lessons we recognized in each stage. So when I started writing this, I dug

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out my “post-it board” to jog my memory and give me a bird’s-eye view of my life once again!

Thanks, Kate, for spurring me on to remember, and to share stories and thoughts with those I hold near and dear. So this is for Rob, Amie, Kate, Jon, Jeff, Carey, Tim, and Tara. It’s also for Riley, Madison, Judah, Kaleigh, Max, Creed, Charlie, Haven, Colin, Campbell, Remedy, Shepherd, Rowen, & Cullen. You are my beloved—my children and grands—in whom I am most definitely well-pleased! I hope you enjoy these little snippets from my life, and recognize God’s hand in so many simple, everyday moments. It was a fun little journey down Memory Lane for me! Bob, I’ve walked most of my journey with you by my side, and I’ve absolutely loved doing life with you! Thank you for loving me so well.



Mom, aka Grammy, Glatma, or Gramz

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Along with this book, I created a website to capture my ideas, life lessons, and pursuits I enjoy. Stop over any time—<https://www.dianeoc.com>

I love you all, and pray God's grace and peace over each one and every one of you.



Mom & Dad, Circa 1946

Dad



My dad, John Kristiansen, traveled here from Denmark to settle in the US with his family when he was only three years old. It was a happy life with six siblings on a farm in Somers, WI that his dad was leasing from another farmer.

My dad told stories of jumping from the hay loft into the hay in the barn, and fun times playing in fields around the farm. One time, his dad took all the kids for a ride in the owner's sleigh. They traveled in a long straight section of land along-side the railroad tracks. Dad said the railroad tracks were a big part of life back then. In summertime, the boys would run along-side the train as it slowed down slightly, while men threw mail and packages off the train for people in Somers!

Once, my dad and brother were playing on the ice pond, and his little brother fell through the ice! My dad grabbed him, and managed to run all the way home with him where my grandma warmed him up 'til he was good as new.

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My dad's dad worked so hard to provide for his family, but he lost the farm he had been leasing and working on so diligently. After all his hard work, the owner went back on his word, and gave the beautifully-refurbished and re-worked farm to his own son! It left my grandfather heartbroken after working so hard for his family. As he lost hope, his mind slipped, and he reverted back in his memory to his time as a soldier overseas. He marched back and forth between the house and the barn, shooting out the windows and lights in their home, while my dad and his siblings cowered in a corner of the house! My dad was terrified. A neighbor called the authorities, and he was taken to an asylum. He was about to be released at Christmas time when he took his own life, leaving my Granny with seven small children. As a boy, my dad worked hard to help his mom with all the household responsibilities. My uncle once told me how much he did, how he looked up to him, and what a great brother he was.

As a teenager, dad had a Model T. He drove his siblings to school each day. My mom was a friend of his younger sister, Ingie, so my dad picked her up each day, too. They fell in love, and after high school he went into the Army Air Corps, serving as a Medic. They wrote letters while he was overseas, and he married my mom on July 18, 1945. My dad used his GI bill to become a pattern maker, and was hired by Kiekaefer Mercury Outboard motors. He crafted each piece of Mercury outboard motors beautifully in

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wood. They they would use the wooden patterns to create molds for the the metal pieces that made up each motor.



July 18, 1945

I was born in 1950. It was always so exciting when dad would get home from work, carrying his silver lunch box and his large thermos for coffee. We ate dinner when he got home at 4:30 PM—quite early, but it was nice because we were able to have a sizable family time before it was bedtime. In the winter I remember watching at the large living room picture window while the snow was coming down. Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra were singing in the background, and we were all cozy at home.

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Dad was always downstairs in his workshop fixing or making things. He worked on our little house on Larkspur Lane, and did much of it himself. When they built the house, they left a large space between the house and garage. I remember when my dad, my uncle, and some friends built the “breezeway” between the house and the garage. This room connected the house to the garage, and included two huge picture windows—one in front and one in back. It also had a fireplace, a wood parquet floor, french doors to the living room, and a doorway to the kitchen.

Dad always had projects of every shape and size! He saved everything, and was always rigging up something with old parts like motor or some such thing. I remember my mom motioning me to join her at the basement door to listen as my dad talked to himself about a problem he was solving with a project. She said, “I just wanted you to hear this, so that you remember he has always done this—so don’t worry about him as he grows older!”

I always remember my dad whistling, humming, or singing. He also played his guitar all the time—in fact, he was even in a band when I was young! I remember dancing and singing all the time. Dad and my uncle recorded some songs, and I still have some with me singing my heart out!

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1951

My dad always had time for me. When I was very young he played “tea party” and “school” with me. As I grew older he always helped with homework when needed, and encouraged me in all my ideas. He loved my projects, and my mom always joked that I was able to inspire him to take on any kind of crazy project! He considered it a challenge, and gave the impression that anything I could think of could be done.

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As a teenager, my friends enjoyed coming over - the boys really enjoyed dad's sense of humor. One day he came home with a wooden boat—an old Switzercraft. It had a big hole in it and he bought it for \$30. He was so excited to fix it up, and talked my mom into reupholstering the seats, too. Since he worked for Kiekaefer Mercury Motors, he was able to get a great deal on an outboard motor. He was so proud of that boat, and everywhere we went people asked us about it because it was so unique. Years later, Dad, Mom, Bob, and I had the boat beautifully restored again, and to this day, we continue to meet interesting people who love the look of that little wooden boat! We all learned to waterski behind it, and I have great memories of days spent at the lake. One time when I was just learning to ski, I started by sitting on a pier. As I took off, a nail caught on the bottom half of my suit and I left it behind! Needless to say, I fell into the water immediately and waited for mom to bring me a towel. Onlookers that day got a big laugh out of that one!

When I was around five, my mom started a grease fire on the stove by accident. I was frightened, and ran to hide in the living room, while the kitchen wall was getting scorched. After putting out the fire, I remember my dad's strong arms reaching out for me, and his comforting words that everything was going to be ok.

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They say that little girls form their concept of God from their interaction with their earthly dads. As I was reflecting on that, and these are some things I learned about God (my heavenly Father) through the actions of my earthly dad—

- I was valued and cherished and loved.
- I was safe and protected.
- I had everything I needed and most of what I wanted.
- He delighted in me with a twinkle in his eye.
- He was positive and affirming.
- He was a man of character.
- He listened to my ideas and helped me “make them happen.”

Anything was possible.

Much later, I reflected on that and learned to know and deeply love my heavenly Father.

[Learn more: <https://www.dianeoc.com/post/father>]

While mom was alive, she was the one I usually talked to on the phone. After my mom died in 2011, I spoke with my dad every day, and went down to visit often. When we were finally able to move him up here to Wisconsin Rapids for the last months of his life, I was able to spend many hours with him each day. I treasured that time with him. We were so blessed to have him with us for 99 years!

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1949 — The spring before I was born

Mom



One of my earliest and most cherished memories of my mom—Bernice Christine (Harris) Kristiansen—was making little “dolls” from the buds and blooms of the huge Hollyhock plants that grew along the side of our first home. We stuck them together with toothpicks; a small and medium bud became the head and body, and an upside-down flower became her skirt! Mom was always surprised I remembered that because I was so young—we had moved from that house when I was three. I guess from the very beginning of my life I was interested in designing things, or “putting pieces together to form something new!”

I cherished times of driving at night with my mom and dad during the winter. I would snuggle up with her and feel so loved—and so cozy—cause she always wore her mink coat! She often told the story of working hard and saving every extra penny when she worked at Snap-On Tools in Kenosha during World War II. Even though Mom and Dad had no extra money to

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their name when they were married in 1945, she still had that treasured fur coat when they got married. She said they would go out and walk down the street, feeling like a million bucks even though at that point they didn't have a penny to spare! I remember her even wearing it to the mailbox in the deadliest of Wisconsin winters to shield her from the storm! Later she had that coat repurposed by a woman who made little teddy bears out of it - one for each daughter and granddaughter.

My mom was a small woman - 4'11", and under 100 pounds. She wore a size 4 1/2 shoe! She had to buy the sample shoes they put out on the racks back in those days! I remember all my cousins coming over and measuring back to back to see if they were almost as tall as Aunt Bernice! And they loved it when their feet fit fit perfectly in her little shoes. They felt quite grown up to wear real high heels that actually fit!

Mom was always positive and encouraging. She sheltered me from any negative extended-family influence, and chose to make her home a positive place. And she did a great job of fostering my imagination. When I was little, she loved it when I outlined my coloring book drawings in black—and to this day I still love a little touch of black in my artwork!

Mom was always making and re-making things like curtains and draperies, as well as re-upholstering chairs and the sofa. And

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she always created a new “first day of school dress” for me. As a bonus, she made matching dresses for my dolls.



1953

Later, when I was in high school, she took me to high-end stores to try on some beautiful designer clothes to see what I liked. Then she would find a pattern and re-create unique designer dresses for me—always impeccable! They never looked “hand-made.” When I was little, she taught me to embroider. And one summer ,she taught me to use her cherished sewing machine. We made an apron. Over the years, I cranked out all kinds of outfits from mini skirts to a full dress suit. I didn’t really love the process of sewing, but I did love the finished products. Whenever mom saw someone dressed impeccably, or if she was in an atmosphere that was well-designed (like a shop or home) she would remark, “Oh that is very rich-looking!”

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Sometimes she'd say someone was “smart-looking,” but most often it was “rich-looking.” She had a good eye, and always appreciated things that were well-designed.

I remember deep cleaning days—when everything was moved, and EVERYTHING was thoroughly cleaned. The kitchen chairs were lined up in the living room. While she scrubbed the life out of the kitchen floor, I was in the living room pretending the chairs were a train—or covered them with sheets to make a fort. I was given so many joyful times of pretending when I was a child!

Mom insisted I take swimming lessons even when I didn't want to, and it really paid off. I ended up becoming a life guard and swim instructor—an awesome job for a teenager!

I only remember being out of my mom's good graces a few times in my life. I didn't like that feeling, and determined that I would always work to please her. When I was in kindergarten, the Villeli family lived across the street. My friend Janet Villeli who was in the middle of seven siblings, was allowed to run much freer than I. One day I followed her through the woods quite far from our neighborhood to the farmhouse of another little boy from our class. He was upstairs in his bedroom (supposedly napping) and was throwing all kinds of things out the window for us—including an iron! When I got home, my mom was so angry

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and I had never seen her like that. I got a spanking and hid under the table. She was freaking out and my dad finally calmed her down. Looking back, I realize that she was just a very frightened mom who had absolutely panicked when her only child disappeared. Now I understand, too, that she had lost a baby boy before I was born, and another baby boy after me. No wonder she reacted the way she did!

Another time when I was dating Bob, I forgot their anniversary. I guess she thought I was old enough to remember those things! I could tell she wasn't happy about something, but I didn't know what. Bob and I had planned to go to dinner and see a play at the Melody Top—a summer theatre in a tent. I was surprised when I saw she was preparing steaks, and then my grandparents arrived! Finally, I realized what was happening. She said we could stay for dinner, but in my immature mind, I was so bummed because I hadn't gotten them a gift. I made the wrong decision to go out to dinner with Bob and stop to buy a gift rather than staying and sharing the meal with them before the play. Big mistake! It took her quite awhile to forgive me, even though I said I was sorry. Finally my dad stepped in to say, "Bernice, she said she's sorry— let it go!" And from then on, each year I panicked that I would forget her birthday or their anniversary! As a parent, I probably went overboard the opposite way, not wanting my kids to feel guilty about remembering important

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family dates. I think there probably should have been a happy medium—to emphasize the importance of traditions and celebrating, without causing guilt. And of course now that I'm an adult, it's obvious to me that, of course she would have preferred we stay for dinner, spending time with with them rather than going shopping for a gift! Sometimes I still wonder why she didn't just come out and tell me it was their anniversary and invite us to have dinner with them before the play. I guess that's part of the lesson—that even the best parents aren't perfect, and communication is important!



1953

Those are two of very few times I remember being out of her good graces. 99% of my memories about my mom are really

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positive. She was a great listener and I have fond memories of chatting endlessly, spilling out everything that happened during the day at school while she prepared supper on our kitchen island. She absolutely loved hearing about my life, and was always positive and encouraging. Mom was also always organized and had lists galore!

As I had my own children, I grew to appreciate my mom even more as I realized everything that goes into parenting! I called to chat with her every day, and to her dying day she loved hearing about everything going on in all our lives as our little family grew. She did her best to be an intentional, loving grandparent. When Bob and I chose to leave the Catholic church, I know at first it was hard for her. After all, she had done her best to raise me in the church! Back then, I really thought that if I just told people what I'd learned in the Bible, they would see it right away too. My mom couldn't understand why I could say I knew for sure I was going to heaven! She asked sarcastically, "What makes you think you're so good you're going to heaven?" But that was the point! I wasn't good enough, but was choosing to rely on Jesus instead of on me. After that encounter, I told God I was going to keep my mouth shut and just pray. If He wanted me to share with people, He should have them start the conversation, and I'd happily share what He was teaching me. My parents ended up supporting Bob and I in our decision, and

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eventually I did have important spiritual conversations with my mom. Thankfully I know that she is waiting for me in heaven.

Mom and dad lived on Larkspur for forty-four years, and in 1997 our family said good by to our family home. They were excited to move into a condo at Trinity, and tackled all the sorting, packing, and moving with organization and gusto. We helped them prepare the condo and move, and they spent thirteen fun years in the condo until mom's heart attack in February of 2011. We helped move them out of the condo and into the assisted living apartment at Trinity complex in March, and mom passed away September 26, 2011. She would have been eighty-nine on November 29th. I consider it a blessing that she lived a long life, and that I was able to be with her as she aged—especially in her last months. In the week before she passed, Karen and I took turns staying there 24/7, caring for her day and night. I wouldn't trade that special time with her for anything!



2011

Karen



For the first seven years of my life I was an only child. Sadly, my parents lost a baby boy before I was born, and lost another baby boy after I was born. Therefore, I was treasured and doted upon. Then suddenly—when I was seven, and in first grade—a sweet baby girl arrived on the scene!



Welcoming my baby sister - 1957

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Karen Lee was born March 4, 1957, and was named after Granny. I must admit I had mixed emotions about it! On one hand, here was this little darling, stealing my show... and on the other hand, she was so stinking cute I couldn't resist her!



Making horses—1961

Because of our age difference, I was usually in more of a “mentoring role” with her, as opposed to having a sibling close in age to play with. Karen followed me around and wanted to do everything I was doing—and most of the time, I was happy to include her.

I loved being an influence in her life—she was almost always willing to let me try out my leadership skills on her! I helped

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plan and orchestrate birthday parties and sleepovers, coached her little grade school cheerleading team, and included her in a myriad of art projects. She was right in there, giving it her all to be part of the neighborhood crew!



1959 - Mother/Daughter dresses

One day, though, I was riding my bike around and around the circle sidewalk, while she was was running back and forth, and in and out. I yelled for her to watch out and get out of the way. She went crying to Mom saying, “Diane called me a ‘destrian!’” When Mom questioned what happened, she realized I’d referred to Karen as a “pedestrian!” As usual, her tears stopped as soon as she understood what it meant.

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Another time, I came home from my friend Judy's house, and little Karen was at my heels saying, "nanno, nanno." She was so excited!



Christmas, 1960

When I went inside, there was a beautiful new piano! Then it was my turn to be excited! I'd been trying to play my friend Judy's piano. I was having fun with it, but I was aching to learn how to really play. Mom signed me up for lessons and the adventure began. That piano was a blessing for both Karen and I, and gave us many happy hours of entertainment.

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1970

We grew older as the years passed, and our lives went in different directions. Bob and I married and started our family while she finished high school and started college. Seven years after our wedding, Karen married her high school sweetheart, Mike Ward. Karen and Mike moved to Texas and started their family. And just like us, they had four darling children.

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Bob, Robby and I at Karen & Mike's wedding



Mom & Dad's fireplace with John, Sarah, Susan, & Josh

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It was my pleasure to talk with Karen about Jesus, and while they were in Texas, I prayed that God would connect them to a good church. My prayers were answered, and Karen and Mike gave their lives to the Lord. They have been serving Him ever since! When they moved back up to Wisconsin, they invested hundreds of hours into the children's ministry at their home church.



Mom & Dad's 50th Anniversary, 1995

Toward the end of our parent's lives, Karen and I grew closer. We made decisions together on caring for them, and worked together to help them through all their transitions. It was so nice to be able to share that responsibility with a like-minded sister! Harmony in our family was always a priority for both of us. I

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have especially fond memories of her weekly overnight visits here when Dad was in his last months. Our Hallmark movie marathons were a welcome respite for both of us, as we navigated our way through end-of-life decisions.

So now there are just the two of us left in our immediate family. What a blessing to have a sister who shares my faith!



2019

Grandparents



I was blessed to have wonderful grandparents who loved me and invested time and resources to impact my life.

MY MOM'S PARENTS

My grandparents were George D. Harris and Veronica (Arentz) Harris. They lived in Kenosha, WI, where Grandpa was a machinist, and Grandma was a homemaker who taught knitting through the technical college night school for adults. She was an accomplished knitter, and her beautiful work was in great demand. My grandpa was always a fun wheeler-dealer. He knew how to strike a good deal to “trade up” for things they wanted or needed. He told me the story of working to save up money with his dad. The plan was to take the train to buy land, and settle out west. When they went as far as they could go by train, they rented horses to go the rest of the way. But they were held up at gun point and had all their money stolen! They had to work their way home. It’s good thing, cause that’s where he met Grandma,

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and without her, I wouldn't be!

When they were dating, Grandpa had a motorcycle with a sidecar which Grandma would ride in. One Sunday during the Great Depression, they were out for a ride when they spotted a dead pig on the road. Grandpa begged Grandma to help him put the pig in the sidecar, and tried to talk her into straddling the seat to ride home, holding onto his waist behind him on the cycle. She wasn't having it, and told him he had to choose—it was her or the pig! Again, it's a good thing he chose Grandma, or I wouldn't be here!



Grandma and Grandpa Harris

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Grandma and Grandpa lived in a little white Cape Cod house off of Sheridan road in Kenosha, WI. It had only one bedroom and bath on the first floor, and an unused bedroom off one side of the open attic upstairs. [I later learned that my grandparents lost a beautiful old home on 82nd Avenue during the Great Depression. My mom loved that home with its rich, deep wooden staircase and trim. She always felt really bad that they lost it. Maybe that's why she became a very astute money-manager...But I digress.] My grandma had mint green kitchen cabinets, and they had a monochromatic rose/burgandy floral carpet in the living room, with a grey hide-a-bed couch and deep green upholstered barrel chairs (with fringe around the bottom.) There was an old TV with a "Rabbit Ears" antenna, and I remember I was allowed to stay up sometimes on a Friday night to watch 77 Sunset Strip. There was a tiny screened-in porch by the front door which I loved to play in, pretending it was my own little house. Off the back, there was a long screened-in "breezeway room" that ran the length of the house. We often had Sunday dinners in that room—Grandmas's fried chicken and all the fixin's. It seems we just finished a noon-hour dinner and got the dishes washed and put away when grandpa would say, "Verone, I think it's time to put out some food for a little supper!" The breezeway was also the room where grandma taught me to knit on tiny needles that had little red plastic mittens on one end to keep my stitches from falling off.

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There were two brick pillars at the end of the driveway, and a teeny, tiny little studio “apartment house” for renters off to the left as you drove up the driveway. To the right was an old fashioned pump that actually worked, and a white bench made out of an old wagon seat. In the front yard was a brick fireplace, and in the very back yard, there were blackberry and raspberry bushes. To this day, whenever I see a raspberry I think of my grandparents. They also owned the vacant lot next door, and it was woodsy. I remember a huge fallen tree that we used to balance on—and lots of pretending took place in that little woods.

My mom had only one brother who had only one son. Uncle Harold was a difficult man, and his relationship with my grandparents was tense. Because of the tension and my uncle’s disinterest in a healthy relationship, Grandma and Grandpa Harris lavished most of their time and attention on our family. I was their first grandchild and was the apple of their eye. We went to their home often, and they often came to ours. I remember one time my mom and I took the train from Milwaukee to Kenosha to visit for a few days. I was excited for the trip and my mom had made me a new blue pinafore dress with a matching dress for my little doll named Tiny.

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One time my grandma took me to a ladies' tea and while she was busy talking, I was busy eating black olives. When she turned around I had olive pits lined up neatly all around the outside of my plate!



Robby made them Great-Grandparents!

It seemed like my grandparents were always winning things, and one year they won a bicycle for me! Grandpa loved fishing, and I remember going with him to the HUGE rocks by the piers in

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Kenosha. It smelled like fish and I wrinkled my nose. We would sit there for hours and he would reel them in. One time when I was staying with them, my grandparents and I went out on Lake Michigan in his little metal fishing boat. We were out quite a ways and I could see grandma was getting a little nervous. The sky was changing, and you could see that a storm was brewing. Grandpa didn't want leave quite yet—he said the fish were just beginning to bite. Suddenly the storm came out of nowhere! The rain pelted down, and waves tossed that little boat to and fro. Good thing Grandpa was an expert boatsman! Grandma shoved me under her seat so that I wouldn't be thrown overboard, and Grandpa did his best to aim toward shore. We finally washed up on large rocks, miles from where we started! Strangers came to help us out, and by God's grace I eventually made it home to my mom and dad in one piece. I've never been a great fan of small boats on large bodies of water. I love the ocean—but only from the shore!

Grandpa was indeed a fisherman, and was always bringing us fish that he froze in cut-off milk cartons. One time when I was a young mom, he brought us one of his HUGE salmons. I was barefoot when I went to remove it from the freezer in our basement, and I dropped that big, hard, frozen fish on my right toe! No one else was around, and there I was, holding my foot and jumping on the other, tears running down my face saying,

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“Owie, owie, owie!” Man, that was one black and blue toe for a very long time!

For several summers in a row, we rented a cottage on Green Lake with my grandparents. We fished and water skied, and just hung out. And when I was a teenager, they bought a home in a mobile home park in Sarasota Florida. They went down in the fall and came back to Wisconsin in the summer. We made several trips down to be with them over our Christmas break. It was always so strange to see outdoor Christmas trees and plastic Santas next to palm trees! And there we were, the only ones on the beach that time of year, determined to get a tan.

One time, just after I'd gotten my driver's license, my sister and I went to the beach on our own, trying to look cool (for the few other people braving the windy beach.) Just as I started to sit up from goose-pimpled-sun-bathing, a seagull flew over and pooped on my head! Man, talk about taking the wind out of a girl's sails! Both our parents and grandparents really got a kick out of that story. I have fond memories of spending time with them. It was really nice to have the whole family together.

After my grandma died, my parents were down in Kenosha a lot to visit Grandpa. And he would always come up here to Rapids for a week each summer to hang out. One year, he helped us plant a garden with vegetables. The kids loved it! We had corn,

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and tomatoes, carrots, green beans, and a solid border of flowers. Later, when I tried to build raised gardens on either side of our patio, he helped me plant a full bed of on-sale petunias just outside the family room window. The flowers made my little attempt at a raised flower bed gorgeous that year!

I remember talking to Grandpa, asking how they managed to get through the Great Depression—and also the war. As he talked about it, I asked what we might be able to do in case something like that happened in our lifetime. He was puzzled, and said he honestly wasn't sure because everything was so connected at this point. It was the '80's, and it would be much more difficult than in the past!



Following in Grandpa's footsteps

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Sometimes I wonder what he would think if he could see the world today! He shared with me that people had been way more self-sufficient back in the day. He talked about some things they did, and told me about the wisdom of Grandma's root cellar. After that, I did my best to have a few things tucked away for our little family in case of emergency or disaster.

The year my grandpa died, my parents were on a cruise. We had taken our kids to Great America in June, and on our way home, we stopped in Kenosha to pick him up for a visit in Rapids. Then we stopped again when we got to Milwaukee, to check on mom and dad's house since they were gone. We could see Grandpa wasn't feeling too well. He told us he had fallen off his bike and hit his head. We decided Bob should take the kids back home to Rapids, and I would stay in Milwaukee to make appointments for Grandpa with mom and dad's doctors. In between doctor appointments, I visited with him, and also used my mom's sewing machine to create new burgundy accent pillows for our family room. I always had a creative project to fill the time—just like my mom and grandmothers. We found out that Grandpa had a brain bleed, and when Mom and Dad returned home from their cruise, he had surgery. Unfortunately he didn't survive long after the surgery. I was very grateful for the one-on-one time I was able to spend with him at the end of his life, he was greatly missed.

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MY DAD'S MOM—“GRANNY”

Granny's maiden name was Kristensen, and when she married my dad's dad, Jens, she became Karen Kristiansen. After Jens' death, she married Axel Henricksen. So we referred to her as Granny, or Grandma Henricksen.



Granny with her husband Jens, my dad, and three daughters

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Granny came over from Denmark with her husband Jens when my dad was three. They were quarantined on Ellis Island for three weeks because of measles, and then they settled in Somers, WI. I know I already told you Jen's story, and that Granny mothered seven children by herself after he hung himself. I can't even imagine the horror and panic I would feel if I was left with no place to live, and seven small children to care for!



Granny with all her kiddos (Grandpa John is far right)
But God's hand was on her life, and her brother, John, and neighbors stepped in to help. Granny worked lots of menial jobs, and at a young age, my dad also pitched in. One awful job Granny took was cleaning out someone's attic where they had kept chickens! It was a horrible mess, and Granny used a rake to

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scrape, and worked hard. Granny just carried on, ever cheerful—humming and singing.

My mom was good friends with my dad's sister, Ingie, and was often at their home. She told me she was always amazed at Granny's peaceful spirit. She would sit and read for hours, even in all the pandemonium of seven children and friends! She once said that if Jens had lived, she would have had a dozen children because each one was so very precious to her!



With Granny at their farm in Pittsville, WI 1952

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Axel Henricksen, a near-by farmer, and Granny helped each other out over the years, and eventually they married. After the children were grown, they moved from Somers to a farm in Pittsville, and we visited them there each summer. [It still amazes me that Bob and I ended up settling so close to that area without even realizing that.] I remember staying in Granny's attic bedroom on a bed with cozy, colorful quilts that she had stitched.

When Axel died, Granny went to live with her daughter Ingrid Poole in Kenosha. Aunt Ingie and Uncle Ray bought a motel on Lake Michigan called Shore Acres, and lived there with Granny and their girls. I remember visiting, and climbing down the long steep steps to the lake where my cousins Carolyn, Eileen, Margaret, Melanie, and I hunted for beautiful little pieces of green, turquoise, and deep blue sea glass that regularly washed up on the shore. I loved being on the shores of Lake Michigan! I think that may be where my love for the sound of waves crashing on the shore began!

There was also another family of cousins that I spent time with. My dad's sister Margie and her husband Uncle Chet had three daughters—Vivian, Kay, and Linda. They lived in Milwaukee, and we would visit occasionally. I remember lots of giggling and fun with my cousins. One time, we held a hand mirror pointing it at the ceiling. We tried to navigate our way around the house with

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only the ceiling as our guide! Uncle Chet and my dad played their guitars, so there was singing and dancing. And they recorded some records at home. They mailed some records back and forth to my dad's brothers in New York so they could hear each others' voices. Uncle Chet also had a movie camera, and took some films of me. as a little girl. Talk about posed and stiff—Yikes! Those were the good ol' days!



Granny at our wedding - 1972

Granny visited each of her seven children throughout the year, and I loved having her come to our house to stay for a few weeks. Her Danish accent intrigued me and she was always cheerful, and humming or whistling. She took me on her knee to play a Danish sing-song children's game. [In English it meant "Saw,

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Saw the Wood ... File, file, file, file the saw!"]

One time, I remember my dad driving us with Granny to visit her brother, at his home. (Somewhere in Illinois, I think.) It was a large home that even had a elevator! It also had a courtyard in the middle of it with a fountain and lovely little garden. I believe he was the one who had come to the US first, and he sponsored Granny and Jens when they came over. He also sent money to help Granny after Jens died.

Granny loved to crochet, and made many practical things for the many cousins in our family. She never owned much, but she gave me a couple small things to remember her by—a little deep-colored Depression glass dish, and a small hand-made tobacco pouch with teeny tiny macramé knots. She remembered every birthday of every grandchild, and always sent each one of us a card with a \$1 bill. I knew she couldn't afford much, and it was always special to me that she remembered. As she aged, she lost her sight because of Glaucoma. But she continued to hum and sing and crochet—she made granny squares “by feel” instead of by sight. She lived to be almost 102!

HERE ARE A FEW STORIES ABOUT RELATIVES I NEVER MET:

MY DAD'S GRANDPARENTS— GRANDPA KRISTIANSSEN'S SIDE:
Jens Kristiansen (died in 1890's) and Johanne Marie Christensen
(1854-1939)

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Johanne Marie is the one who made the tobacco pouch Granny gave me. At first I thought it was a cute little old-fashioned purse because it was so intricate and lovely! I wrote to ask Granny to tell me more about the back-story, and she wrote this in her Danish-English way: “Your great-grandmother it was, her name was Johanne Kristiansen, and she made it for her sweetheart before they were married. She was very good at all that fine hand work. I don’t have the date they were married. Your great-grandfather was a fine carpenter and had a shop built on to the house. They had two children, Sigurd and Gudrin, and one on the way when the great plague (or whatever it was) went through Europe and your great-grandpa Jens Kristiansen died a few months before my Jens was born. It was hard for the family and your great-grandma mourned him all her life. She was 85 years old when she died in 1939.” I have that old letter tucked inside the little tobacco pouch to remind me of Granny and those who went before her!

MY DAD’S GRANDPARENTS — GRANNY’S SIDE: Neils Peter Kristensen (1862-1947) and Mette Marie Boutrup Larsen (1861-1929) Children were Thorwald, Magrethe, Johannes (John), Asta, Evald, Ragnhild, Bodil Marie, Esther Kristine, Ejlev, and Karen [my grandma, known to all of us as “Granny.”]

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Granny (Front left, age 7) with family in potato garden—Denmark, 1900

In 1975 Ewald, Granny's brother, translated from Danish their father Neil's "family memorandum" with the hope that "it can be of benefit and pleasure both to the brothers and sisters and to their children and children again." I have it stored in the Hope Chest marked "Niels Peter Kristensen Stories." In his writings, Neils talks a tiny bit about his ancestors dating back to the founder of their family there, Peiter Boutz, who lived in Copenhagen in the year 1540. But what struck me most was how my dad's grandfather talked about his own father. My great-grandfather was part of the layman-movement where Christians met in homes, "singing hymns and bearing witness

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with their whole hearts.” He had an excellent singing voice, and testified in speech and writing. I’ve often thought that he no doubt prayed for his generations that would follow, which includes me!

MY MOM’S GRANDPARENTS—HARRIS SIDE: Burt Harris and Mary Marten

The only story I know about them was mentioned when I talked about Grandpa Harris. He told me when he was a young teen he and his dad (Burt) had worked hard, and saved up their money to purchase land out west. Their plan was to take a train ride west, rent some horses, and travel further west to buy some land where they were “still selling it cheap.” They did not make it though. While on horseback they were held up, and all their money was stolen! Grandpa thought that whoever rented the horses had set them up. They were so disappointed, and had to slowly work their way back home to Kenosha.

MY MOM’S GRANDPARENTS—VERONICA’S SIDE: Peter Arentz and Christina (WELLGEN?)

I’m not sure about them. I do remember my mom (Bernice Harris Kristiansen) talking about one of her grandmothers, either Mary or Christina, but I’m not sure which one. She owned a boarding house in Kenosha, and my mom told me that she was a mean woman who sometimes locked her in the attic! She was

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also known to hold seances in her boarding house. When I heard about that as an adult, I was already a Christian, and I knew about the authority that I had in Jesus' name. I took authority over any spirit of witchcraft or sorcery that would try to impact our family line from that point on.

It wasn't until I was an adult that I thought much about the generations who came before me. We all tend to live in the "here and now." I'm realizing that we generally do not appreciate history, and how connected we really are with those who have gone before us. I wish I'd asked more questions!

And here in the US, we like to think of ourselves as being so independent! But in reality, each of us relies on God, as well as those He places in our lives who have invested in us over the years. For example, I thought I was a "first generation Christian," when in fact, some of my relatives in generations before me were outspoken in their faith—they impacted their circles of influence back in the day. And no doubt, they prayed for my generation and yours. God both heard and answered their prayers! I'm so very grateful that God knew—even before I was born—that I would one day sit at a laptop to write down these stories and thoughts for you! I pray that you will recognize His hand on your life! Always know that He placed you exactly where you are in history. You were born on His timetable, and He does, indeed, have a plan for your life.

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“The One who calls you is faithful, and He will do it.”

I Thessalonians 5:24



I'm in the front row wearing a yellow dress made by my mom—
with Granny, Aunt Margie, & my “girl cousins”

Toys



I had a variety of toys over the years, but in general we all had fewer toys than children have now days. Because we only had one - or maybe two dolls, for example, we really took good care of them. Even though my parents didn't have much, they and my grandparents worked really hard to stack lots of lovely presents under the Christmas tree each year, and I definitely had favorites.

WOODEN DUCKIES

The oldest toy we still have is a wooden pull-toy of a mama duck followed by little clicking ducklings as it rolls across the floor. I can still remember my sister dragging it down our hall.

JENNIFER

When I was three, I got a large "Nancy Walker Doll." I named her Jennifer because apparently there was a little girl across the street by that name, and it was the only little girl name besides my own that I knew! Jennifer, and eventually Tiny, did

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everything with me, and my mom made them clothes that matched my own. Every Christmas Jennifer would be under the Christmas tree again with a new outfit - one year it was red flannel jammies and a robe that matched my own gift of jammies and robe. Another year she was dressed like a bride! Eventually my dolls got “first day of school dresses” to match my own. I had a doll buggy and stroller so there were trips around the neighborhood to visit other friends and dolls.



Me with Jennifer

KITCHEN

I inherited a little table and ice cream parlor chairs that were my mom's when she was a little girl. It's special to me because it was hers, and I still have it. Every child and grandchild has used

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those little chairs at some point! My dad made me a little wooden stove, refrigerator, and cupboard. My little kitchen was set up in my bedroom, and I spent many hours pretending on my own, as well as serving my dad “dinner” when he was home.



Busy training to be a mom

GAMES

Sometimes we played board games, dominos and cards as a family when I was quite young. Candyland was definitely my favorite.

TINY

I loved playing with my dolls. “Tiny” was the first little baby doll I remember, and I still have her! Each of my granddaughters has

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played with her at some point! Tiny Tears was a mainstream popular doll at the time, but my parents couldn't afford her. They found my own little "Tiny" whose eyes opened and closed. It surely didn't matter to me if she was the actual Tiny Tears! Mom always made new clothes for her, and she went everywhere with me. I can still remember riding the train with mom and Tiny in our crisp blue pinafores! We traveled from Milwaukee to Kenosha to spend a few days with my grandparents.

RECORD PLAYER

I had a little 78 speed record player. Mom enrolled me in a 'record club' for awhile. Every other week I looked forward to new stories and songs arriving in the mail. I think my favorite was "Peter, Please It's Pancakes," a story about a little boy who was always late.

My dad was also able to burn recordings into records, which was fascinating, and we had fun recording lots of my own stories and songs.

LITTLE BLUE TRUCK

One year when I was about four, I surprised my parents by asking for a blue truck for my birthday! They bought me a little blue stake truck so I could remove the stakes on the flatbed. That little truck sailed back and forth for hours down the wooden floors in our hallway!

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LITTLE BLACKBOARD AND CHALK

I had a little blackboard- about 30" X 24." At first my parents and I just practiced letters and numbers and I drew some pictures.



Hours and hours of fun

As I got older, that little blackboard was transformed in my mind to a full size classroom blackboard, and I spent many, many hours pretending I was a teacher - practicing on neighborhood friends, or lining up my dolls to fill in as students. As the years went on, I made up bulletin boards and decorated my little "classroom," which was my own little spot in a corner of our basement. I REALLY wanted to be a teacher.

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ARTS & CRAFTS

One of my favorite things to do was color and make things. I had the usual coloring books and crayons. (Crayola didn't market markers until 1978) I loved colors and textures and was always inventing something! When we got our first TV, I was around five. My mother set me up at my little table, and I watched "Miss Frances Ding Dong School." This was the very first educational children's show. She was kind, and creative, and encouraging. She had little projects everyday like molding clay, ways to use crayons, and how to make simple things like a cradle out of a cardboard box, for instance. It really sparked my creativity! When I was in fourth or fifth grade, I found a stack of my grandma's tiny magazines called Pack O' Fun, filled with all kinds of simple projects. It really sparked my imagination!

SWINGSET

When I was three, we moved into the house my dad built on Larkspur Lane. One of the first things my parents did was put up a swing set with sturdy deep green poles, red cross pieces, two red wooden swings, and a green glider with yellow seats. All the kids in our neighborhood used to come to our house and hang on it every which way! Mom and Dad loved that we were the hub of activity for the neighborhood.

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I'm second from left :)

TV

When I was around five my dad brought home a black and white TV. Wow, it was amazing! Besides “Miss Frances,” Mom let me watch “Leave it to Beaver,” and “Howdy Doody.” As I got a little older I could watch shows like “The Lone Ranger,” “Rin Tin Tin,” “Father Knows Best,” and “The Donna Reed Show.” Our family would watch “The Lawrence Welk Show” every Saturday night; the best part was when the four Lennon Sisters sang their song for the evening. On Friday nights, mom went grocery shopping, and when she got home, we usually had fish sticks and then we all watched “The Flintstones” together.



TV night!

When I was around ten, the TV broke, and my parents didn't fix it or get a new one. [I didn't realize until much later that they really couldn't afford it.] But during the time we were without the TV, I had plenty of time for free play and it was during that time that I really started getting creative.

JILL & BARBIE

One day when I was about eight, my mom came home with a new doll “just because.” It was a real surprise because we usually only got new toys on special occasions. She was a “Jill Doll” and looked like a blond teenager—much more realistic than Barbie who wasn't invented yet. Her legs bent at the knees and her eyes

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opened and closed. Mom made lots of doll clothes when Barbie and Ken came out. I was around nine or ten when they were added to my collection. Many hours of pretending happened with those dolls! I used to shape aluminum foil around a roller skate to make “cars” for them, sailing them around the basement during the winter months.

INTERNATIONAL DOLL COLLECTION

Later, a family friend and school teacher—Kathleen Pfeiffer—traveled abroad every summer and brought me a doll from each country she visited. I had quite a collection that was displayed in a hutch my dad made to sit on one of my dressers. I still have many of them, and take them out each Christmas, settling them on the branches of our Christmas tree.

RADIO

There were often dramas on the radio that really sparked the imagination! On Sunday nights I enjoyed listening to “The Shadow Knows” and other stories. I really looked forward to them—they sparked my imagination.

BLUE SCHWINN

One year my grandparents surprised me on my birthday with a shiny, new, blue two-wheeler Schwinn bicycle. Grandpa had won it in a contest and was so excited to give it to me. It was a little big, but I hopped right on. Since my birthday is in mid-January

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my dad cleared the way in the basement and taught me to ride. I spent hours all winter riding around and around the poles in the basement. When spring came, much to everyone's surprise, I was only able to ride in a circle! I had to re-learn how to balance in order to go straight for any distance. Ahhh ... the joys of growing up in snowy Wisconsin!



The bike my grandpa won

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1531 W. Larkspur Lane



When I was three years old my parents bought an acre lot in a new subdivision in River Hills, a northern suburb of Milwaukee. It had been a farmer's field and everything was very open when my parents built the house.



1953—Humble Beginnings

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Later, dad added a garage, but left space to add a “breezeway” or family room when they could afford it. I remember my uncle coming from Connecticut one summer a few years later to help my dad complete the house. I was bummed because I got the Mumps and literally could not speak while he was there! I used my little blackboard to communicate with the family as best I could.

Mom and dad put a red, green, and yellow swingset in the backyard, and all the kids moving into the neighborhood found their way to our yard. The Vilelli family lived across the street and they had seven children. Janet Vilelli and I were the same age and played together a lot in the early years.



Janet Vilelli & I - First Communion

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I loved all the commotion at their house, and I remember they had a huge fish tank built into their family room wall. I was also impressed that when I ate over, they always had a huge bowl of buttered noodles! I loved that. Behind their home was a large field of trees that was part of one of the larger estates in River hills. It had horse trails, and sometimes we would see people riding. Janet was a little mischievous, and eventually my mom said I could only play with her in our yard!

In grade school, I branched out and started playing with Judy Goodwin who lived on the next street around our block. She was a year younger than me, but we had a lot in common and spent hours and hours together. Even when I switched to St Eugene School and she continued at Maple Dale, we continued to play “school,” “office,” [her mom was a bank teller] and of course, we played with dolls. We rode our bikes in the summer and in the winter we walked down the street to one of our neighbor’s yards that had a natural ice pond every year. Judy had a piano at her house and it was through my time with her that my parents realized I had an interest in music. I remember sleeping over at her house. She had little glow in the dark crosses from her Vacation Bible School, and I remember her telling me what she believed about Jesus. I remember being worried about her and praying that she would become a Catholic so she could go to heaven.

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As I got older I became the “neighborhood organizer.” I talked kids into doing all kinds of things with me! I organized lemonade stands, and “Guess the Spice” stands. (People had to smell the spice to win a cookie). One year we made a haunted house in our basement with peeled grapes for a bowl of eyeballs and my mom’s round blue glass vase turned upside down with a flashlight shining up for a crystal ball. Several times I talked kids into doing plays with me - and talked my parents into rigging up their old living room draperies across the basement to create a stage.



Neighborhood production—The Toy Store

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When they installed a Military Nike Site across the busy highway that bordered our safe little neighborhood, we often ran and took shelter as planes or helicopters flew in and out, we took cover to be “safe from the communists.” We had drills at school and knew if something bad happened, we would need to take cover under our desks. I also remember having the whole school walk home in groups to practice in case of some kind of disaster. I lived a long way from school, and we walked in a large group at first with with an adult splitting off and leading us in smaller groups until I finally reached home.

[More: <https://www.dianeoc.com/post/under-the-desk>]



Dad's Christmas present 1959

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But mostly life went on with childhood games and innocent times. Every summer I had to weed the driveway, which at the time was made up of a gazillion tiny white stones! No fun! But as a teenager I remember getting to ride my dad's riding lawn mower - I wore my swimsuit to get a tan, and listened to his transistor radio. Fun times!

All in all, growing up on Larkspur Lane was wonderful! In summer there were lots of green grass & dandelions, Killdeers' nests in the stones on the side of the road, and the happy voices of children playing outdoors. When it rained, the ditches filled with water and we could sail boats down the block through the culverts. In winter there were snowmen, snow forts, and skating in the ditches and ponds.



1997

Grade School



I started grade school at our local public school—Maple Dale—in the close-by community of Fox Point. It was there I completed two years of Kindergarten, first grade, second, and third grade. I loved school and have many memories of recess where we ran in the large field below the playground. It was there that we really used our imaginations and made well-worn pathways and forts under the HUGE lilac bushes. I especially enjoyed Mrs. Wills, my third grade teacher. She was older than my previous teachers and was always bright and positive. She read to us every day after lunch and made learning fun by having lots of hands-on and creative experiences. I especially remember the story, *Miss Pickerel Goes to Mars*. She created all the various voices and really made it fun. We were in the older section of the school on the second floor, and I loved that older part of the building. One time we made paper mache planets when we were learning about the solar system, and we strung them across the ceiling of our classroom. I also joined Brownie scouts at

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Maple Dale and had some wonderful leaders who taught us so many fun and interesting things. I made some good friends, especially Vicki Petzko whose mom was one of our leaders. I really enjoyed all I learned in that atmosphere, and earned a lot of badges. Even after I switched schools, I continued meeting with Troop 160 every week. And every year my mom sewed me a new “first day of school dress” –I looked forward to that every year.



1957 - Vicki Petzko and I

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The newly developing suburbs north of Milwaukee—Fox Point, Bayside, and River Hills were spread out, so it wasn't possible for me to walk to school. I rode the school bus every day, and I absolutely loved my bus driver, a sweet older man with a great sense of humor —and he really enjoyed children. I remember one day after school it was absolutely pouring rain and he actually drove right up into our driveway to drop me off closer to the door! And every Christmas my mom would wrap up a carton of Camel cigarettes for me to give him. Boy, times have sure changed!

Our family attended St Monica's, a Catholic church in Whitefish Bay which was really too far away to be labeled a "neighborhood church." But when I was in kindergarten, the Catholic church purchased a tiny little white church in the community of Fox Point, and planted a new congregation called St Eugene's. I loved that picturesque little white church with its steeple, and it was there that I made my first communion. Soon after that, enough money was raised to build a "fine new, modern church" with a school wing attached. I must say that while all the adults were very pleased with their modern version of church, I much preferred the old wooden floors and pews and the traditional look of that little white church.

In the fall of 1959, St. Eugene school was staffed and ready to go. It was there that I started fourth grade. Mrs Briski was our

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teacher; mostly I remember that her eyes bulged out when she lost patience with the boys! And no wonder—there were forty-two of us in six rows of seven, all lined up. She had her hands full! But even though the boys sometimes got squirmy, everyone was very respectful and Mrs Briski kept all things in order. I wore a little jumper with tiny blue and black checks, a white blouse, navy knee highs, saddle shoes, and a white or navy sweater when needed— every day for 5 years!



St Eugene uniform

I met Mary Heiser on the school bus the very first day I started going to St. Eugene School. She was shy, but I won her over! She was in the same grade, and I spent many hours with Mary at

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recess and on the bus talking and working on homework. Eventually we started to hang out at each others' homes. We had a whole circle of friends and enjoyed birthday parties, sleepovers, and just hanging out. But I really spent most of my time with Mary.

I've mentioned that surrounding my neighborhood were huge estates. There were large shrubs, trees, and fields separating our neighborhood. I remember peeking through a little opening in some shrubs one day, and finding a "secret path" that took me to a long driveway. To the left was a HUGE mansion. It was beautiful to me, and took my breath away! It was so large and surrounded by meticulously groomed gardens and shrubs. Later I found out that the estate belonged to a widow named Mrs. Kiekaefer. I loved going there to explore. One day when I walked down the long driveway away from her mansion, I realized that the "driveway" was actually a long, private road that connected the driveways of other large estate owners. Eventually I followed the private road all the way to the end. Much to my surprise I realized I was on Dean Road —and my friend Mary Heiser's house was right across the street!

The private driveway/road became an easy shortcut to Mary's. We would meet in the middle and explore some of the horse trails that circled our neighborhood. Sometimes we would go all the way to her house. She was one of seven children so there was

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always lots of action at her house. They had an amazing little house on their property that looked just like a miniature of their house. We played for hours in that little house—everything from pretending we were a “modern day family” to pretending we lived “in the olden days.” They also had a pond where we swam and hung out with other friends. One day we got up our courage and knocked on the door of the mansion on the huge estate. We asked to meet Mrs Kiekaefer. She was a sweet old lady who welcomed us in and gave us permission to walk the ground of her estate any time we wanted to. It was like entering another world—the gardens and flowers were absolutely stunning! Mary and I remained friends even as our social circles widened and changed in high school.



Sister Mary Marcinus

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My fifth and sixth grade teacher was a young nun named Sister Mary Marcinus. Fifth grade is probably the most memorable grade school year for me. I made lots of friends and really enjoyed school. Sister Marcinus was a key person in my life. She impacted me in three huge ways: 1. She told me to ask Jesus into my heart when we went to communion. 2. Sister acknowledged my creativity and asked me to help her decorate large bulletin boards, and soon I was doing them all by myself. I loved it, and that got me started on the first of hundreds of huge projects I would take on over the years 3. Sister also told me that I was a leader and invited me to a small YCS (Young Christian Students) group. About 5 or 6 of us met after school once a week to talk about influence, choose actions steps, and put them in into action. As I look back I realize that this was actually leadership coaching! She would never know what an impact she had on the trajectory of my life! Who could imagine that I would one day develop a group coaching experience for leaders?! Fun fact: we were always curious about the nuns, and wondered what they would look like if they were just “real people.” One day I met Sister Marcinus’ mom, and in conversation it came up that she had red hair. From then on my mind kept imagining her with hair!

As we grow, at some point each of us begins to wonder, “Who am I?” and “What is my purpose—why am I alive?” When I was in

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grade school, our little neighbor girl, Debbie Clyde died. The corner of the Clyde family's backyard touched the corner of ours. They were a family with five kids, and Debbie was the youngest. She developed a brain tumor and died at age six. It was my first encounter with death, and my parents took me with them to the wake. I was so sad to realize my sweet little friend was gone. I think that's when I began to think about life and death, and really wondered about God.



Debbie Clyde and my first puppy, Scottie

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I was to be confirmed in sixth grade, and each of us were to choose a saint or Biblical name. I wanted to remember Debbie, and asked Sister about it. She told about Deborah in the Bible and I loved her story. I took Deborah as my confirmation name so I wouldn't forget Debbie, and I wished for strong faith like Deborah. Deborah is one of the most influential women of the Bible. She's known for her wisdom and courage and is the only woman of the Old Testament who is known for her own faith and action, not because of her relationship to her husband or another man. I'd forgotten about that until I was writing this book! It's interesting how God grows us, isn't it? In fifth and sixth grade I'd become a trusted leader at St. Eugene's. I was often sent down to help in the first or second grade classrooms. I loved working with the younger students, and could just imagine myself as a teacher. I was also given the privilege of serving, by helping to clean the church altar and sanctuary. The area behind the altar was always a mystery so I felt really special when I was given that responsibility.

And while I'm thinking of it, my puppy Scottie in the photo disappeared one day. My dad told me that he had to take him to live on a farm cause it would just be a better place for him. I totally trusted him so I never questioned it. We got another dog, Teddy, who grew to be HUGE! In fact, his coat got so thick, my friends actually thought we had a pet bear in the back yard! It

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wasn't until I was an adult that my dad told me Scottie had actually been hit by a car! I'm really glad he sheltered me from that.



Favorites: Mary front left / Susie back right

A new girl, Susie Docktor moved to the area during 6th grade, and she fit right in to my circle of friends. Her father was a plastic surgeon. ["Dr. Docktor!"] She lived in a huge white house and I got lost in in a few times! They actually had a swimming pool in their basement, and she had several pool parties there. She was super smart and a very good student, but she also had a mischievous streak.

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One night in 7th grade Susie and I were hanging around school as the boys basketball team was finishing up a game. There were no locker rooms so the boys things were left in our classroom. We decided it would be a fun prank to take one of each of their shoes and put them in the wastebasket! The next day our usual jovial teacher Mr. Orten was very stern. He said that the night before, parents were waiting and waiting for the boys until someone finally found the shoes! He asked for whoever did it to raise their hand. Much to his surprise Susie and I raised our hands! Never in a million years would he have guessed it was us —two girls who had never been in trouble. Our punishment was to bring shoe shine equipment the next day and polish the boys shoes! My dad really had a hard time keeping a straight face when he found out why I needed to borrow his shoe polish and brushes!



Mary Heiser & I in 2018 - 50th HS Reunion

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Another time Mary and Susie and I road our bikes around RiverHills and were exploring near a creek. Unfortunately there was some kind of wasp nest and several found their way up my pant leg! Yikes! I remember riding all the way home cause I didn't want to pull my pants down in public to let them out. We ran back to my bedroom and let them out - and it was mom to the rescue to exterminate! Thankfully I was only stung a couple times.

We had sleepovers and birthday parties and in the winter time all my friends met at the Fox Point skating rink. I remember the music playing, the smell of hot chocolate, and the fire crackling in the warming house. I was always so excited to see who might ask me to skate around the pond. My heart beat the fastest when my heart-throb, Johnnie Stamm asked me to skate and held my hand as we talked and circled the ice.



Flapper party at a friend's

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We were pretty sheltered from the world in our little Catholic school, but we did know some things going on in the world. I remember watching TV as Alan Shepherd was the first US man in space when I was 11 in 1961. That was incredible! And I remember talk of prayer being removed from public schools in '62, and then the Bible was banned in '63. My parents were so happy I was at St, Eugene's!

And I will never forget when our principal came in and told us that President Kennedy had been shot. A cloud hung over the nation, and we watched the funeral on TV as his little children bravely walked and stood with their grieving mother. The Kennedy family was young and fresh and we could all relate to their grief. It wasn't until the late 60's or early 70's that Bob came over with a tape recoding with a journalist putting the pieces together to clearly show there was a conspiracy. We believed it, but the news coined the phrase, "conspiracy theory," and they've been using that to discredit actual conspiracies ever since.

We all attended Mass every day, and two sisters played the huge majestic organ in the choir loft. First one graduated and then the other. When I realized that there would be no one left to play the organ, I volunteered to learn to play over the summer. I talked my friend Mary into doing it with me. I'll never forget getting the "Modern Songs for Church" music and playing "Praise to the

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Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation!” on our piano. My heart was stirred and I was highly motivated to learn to play the organ. My mom arranged from to use a a neighbor’s small organ to practice most days a week. For lessons, I took the bus to Nicolet and then walked about a mile to Bay Shore Shopping Center where I met with a teacher weekly. Mary and I got quite a system going. Sometimes we would take turns playing, sometimes we both played - one on each keyboard, and sometimes one of us did the hands and the other played the pedals with our feet! I still can’t believe they let us do that! One day we slipped a note in the back of the organ with our names and the date, hoping someone would find it someday. I think I’d been reading too many Nancy Drew mystery books!



8th Grade Graduation

High School



There I was—a freshman all decked out in my underclassman uniform— a grey/ white/black and red plaid skirt, white blouse with grey blazer, and grey knee highs with penny loafers. We waited in the huge narthex for the school doors to open and be directed to lockers, homeroom, and find our way around the three story building called Dominican, a Catholic high school in Whitefish Bay.

Each day I rode the school bus - a much longer ride than my ride to Maple Dale or St. Eugene's, and it was there that I began to make a couple of new friends. [Sometimes Mary rode the bus, but often she caught a ride with her parents so mostly I was on my own.] The lunch room was filled with animated students I did not know. Thankfully, my new school bus friends had the same lunch hour as me and it was easy to gravitate toward that table each day. Dominican was filled with students from larger surrounding grade schools like St Monica's and St Roberts, St

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James, and even some of the public schools. Only a few students from St Eugene's went to Dominican [most of them went to our public school, Nicolet] so I was a very small fish finding my way in a very big pond.



Upper Classman Uniform

It was all so new. Very exciting, but rather hard to break into the larger cliques like the one from St Monica's. I realize now that I was a bit of a social climber — I set about to “work my way up in social status.” If I had it to do over again, I would have stuck with my new bus buddies and just had a good time. But I set my sights on the cheerleaders, the athletes, the popular kids, and I determined to be one. I met Christina Agulara in my French class

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Freshman year. Her family had escaped from Cuba when it was taken over by communists and here she was in central Wisconsin! We became fast friends. She was outgoing and popular and she easily became a cheerleader Freshman year.

School was fun and I did well, but mostly I remember making floats, decorating for events, and painting large signs for the pep club. I also served on the school newspaper and the yearbook committee, and enjoyed both of those experiences. In religion class, I remember being taught that the stories of the Bible were just that- simply stories. That greatly disillusioned me, and I remember thinking, "Then why bother believing?" Of all my classes I enjoyed my art classes the most. I had always wanted to be a teacher, and during my junior year I wondered if I could combine teaching with my passion for art—why not become an art teacher?

In the fall of my sophomore year, someone asked if I knew one of the football players, Glen Hiller. I didn't know who he was, but when I heard he wanted to ask me to homecoming, I said I'd go with him. We hung out with a really fun group of kids. I liked him, but mostly I liked being in that social group. There was more acceptance from a wider group of people. On Friday nights there were games, or CYO (Christian Youth Organization) dances at various Catholic churches— with live bands. I hung out with Glenn and the gang throughout sophomore and junior years.

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Hanging out - Fitz, Laura, Me, Glenn

Between my freshman and sophomore year our family took a trip to New York to visit my “twin cousin’s” family. We really hit it off, and the following summer Laura came to stay with us for a couple weeks. She fit in so well with my friends, and we had a great time that summer. We went to a formal ball at a country club that was hosted by one of my friends in the ABX sorority, and I set her up with my friend Denny Lauden, who went to Marquette High.

One of my big goals was to become a cheerleader. I had tried out freshman, sophomore, and junior year but did not make the

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team. No one had ever made cheerleading as a senior who did not have previous cheerleading experience, so I thought that was a dream that would be unrealized. But, the school had a rule that you could only be a cheerleader for three out of four years. My friend Christina had been a cheerleader for three years and was not eligible to try out for senior year. She knew my desire and wanted to help me. So she coached me for weeks until I had all the moves and stunts down pat.



Denny, Laura, Me, Glenn

Elections for class officers were at the same time as cheerleading tryouts, and I was running for Senior Class vice president.

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Cheerleading tryouts went well, but the hour before they announced who made the squad, my homeroom teacher called me out of class and tried to talk me into withdrawing my name from the elections! At first I said no. If I didn't make cheerleading, I really wanted to pour my energy into senior class activities. She reluctantly told me I made the squad, so I wisely withdrew from the election to give someone else a chance. I was so excited about making the squad, but I couldn't tell anyone! Knowing ahead of time kind of took some of the fun out of it. But soon I was swept up in the excitement. Thanks to Christina I was the first person ever to make cheerleading as a senior without any previous cheerleading experience.



Christina

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Cheerleading was fun! I was also on the homecoming court my senior year. I went with a friend who was one of the football players, Paul Cera. We all hung out in a nice group, and had a really fun senior year. My friend Jane was Homecoming queen. We were both cheerleaders, and we both ended up going to UW-Milwaukee, often carpooling.



Homecoming Court 1968 - On the Right with Paul

High school was a fun season of life, and looking back I can see God's hand of protection on me. There are so many things that could have derailed my life, but thankfully I made some pretty wise choices in that season.

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Cheerleading, 1968

Blind Date



I saved this as a separate chapter, due to its importance in my life. Mary Heiser and I had been besties in grade school, and even though we began to move toward different circles of friends in high school, she remained a trusted friend. One day she was at a Marquette High swim meet watching her brother compete. While there, she met Patrick Quinn who asked her out on a date. She was flustered and said, “I don’t even know you—my parents would never let me go out with you!” He suggested, “Why don’t you get a friend, and I’ll get a friend, and we’ll all go out together.” Mary talked it over with her mom who said, “If Diane will go with you, it will be ok.” So... I was the friend who got talked into going on this date so that Mary could go out with Pat.

Meanwhile, Pat asked his friend Bob O’Connor if he would go with him, and so it was that we were the two chosen to tag along while Pat and Mary went on their date!

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I asked around about Bob to see if I could learn anything ahead of time, but no one at Dominican seemed to know much about him — he was a year older than me. But someone said, “I think he’s the guy with red hair.” That statement kind of scared me, cause the only red head I’d ever seen was Howdy Doody, and he had bright red hair with a face full of freckles! I even thought about canceling when I heard that, but Mary was counting on me so I thought, “It’s only one night—just go to help her out.”

So on February 24th at 8:15 PM, I saw Bob O’Connor for the first time. Yes, his hair was definitely leaning toward red—but not bright and garish like Howdy Doody, but a handsome shade of auburn. And no freckles! In fact, his face was nicely bronzed from skiing that day. When I came out to the family room, he had actually been telling my dad how he had broken a ski that day, and they were talking about how he might be able to fix it.

Then, we were off with Pat and Mary for a 9:00 show at the Downer Theatre in Shorewood. It was a super-cold evening, and I remember standing in the lobby near a heater, chatting and waiting for the doors to open. The movie was *Georgie Girl*, a pretty awful movie in an old theatre with dusty red seats. But it didn’t dampen the fun—it was kind of exciting to get to know this “mystery man!” We headed to Big Boy after the movie, where Pat entertained us by blowing the paper off his straw so it stuck on the ceiling. I was so glad my date seemed more mature

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than that—Ha!

After that night we talked on the phone a couple times, and Bob asked me to his prom. I said yes, even though my prom at Dominican was on the same night! I was in charge of the decorations so of course I had to go—our school staircase would be transformed into the staircase of an old southern mansion, and the cafeteria doors led to a room transformed into a beautiful garden at night. It turned out that Bob lived just down the street from Dominican - 5733 N Kent Avenue. Our plans were to go to his pre-prom party, then stop in at my prom, drive downtown to the Art Center on Lake Michigan for his prom, attend his post-prom dinner and dance at the Lai Lanai Supper Club on the West Side, and finish the night with Mass at Jesu. The next day we'd head over to the zoo, jaunt over to the lakefront, and add one more trip to Big Boy. Phew!

After planning our prom date, Bob headed off to New York on a school trip with his cousin Dick who was a junior like me. Years later I learned that while he was there, Bob met Marilee Muenta who swept him off his feet! He lamented that he had asked me to prom and almost canceled, but being a responsible young man, he told her he had to keep his word. His plan was to continue his relationship with Marilee after his obligatory date with me. But prom was magical—in spite of the teased up hair-do a family friend sprayed into place on my head! We really hit it off on our

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prom adventure, and I'd have to say that when we both started thinking more seriously about each other. Bob broke the news to Marilee that it was over before it really started. After I learned about Marilee, I suddenly realized why Pat Quinn kept singing "Merrily we roll along" at Big Boy on prom weekend. Ha!



Prom 1967

When summer came, Mary Heiser and I were heading off to be counselors at Camp WeHaKee, an all-girls camp in Winter Wisconsin. [Side note: There was only one weekend were

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men/boys were allowed to visit their sister/daughter campers. I was excited cause I wasn't sure I liked the "all-girl" atmosphere, and I was looking forward to seeing some guys that weekend! Unfortunately the day before guests were to arrive, I leaned over to check out the menu on the log-lined dining lodge. Suddenly there was a sharp sting—a wasp stung me right below my right eye! My eye puffed and became just a slit, and the whole right side of my face was swollen—HUGE! Oh well, no chance to meet any handsome brothers-of-campers that time around!

I should add that during my time at camp I actually considered becoming a nun! Thankfully that only lasted about two minutes, cause Bob was to be in my future. But he almost blew it! I was granted special permission to leave Camp We Ha Kee for one week so I could attend cheerleading camp with my high school squad. Bob & I managed to squeeze in one night together in Milwaukee before we left for cheerleading camp. He took me to the definitely-not-romantic movie, *The Dirty Dozen!* But in spite of that, I really liked him, and we had a couple weeks at the end of the summer to hang out and have some fun.

By fall, Bob wanted to date exclusively, but he was heading east for college at Holy Cross as I was entering my senior year. I knew he would be too far away to attend any dances or games with me, and I didn't want to miss out on the fun of senior year—I was finally a cheerleader, and there would be lots of fun social events

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I didn't want to miss. I told him I really liked him but I thought we should date other people while he was away. So my senior year I hung out in my group of friends, and went with different guy-friends to important events like homecoming. At one point, Bob's cousin Dick invited me to his prom on the west side. He had just broken up with his girlfriend and wanted to show up with a "mystery woman." He'd asked Bob if it was OK to borrow me. Bob agreed, and I said yes. It was a fun to be the mystery woman for a night!



Sweater Bob gave me for HS graduation

Cheerleading was a blast, and I also worked on the school paper and the yearbook. It was a super-fun year, but I really did miss Bob. I wrote to him almost every day, and almost every day I got

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a letter back from him. And boxes of beautiful yellow roses arrived from him periodically! We decided we could afford a fifteen-minute phone call once a week which we both looked forward to. Christmas with him was wonderful. He gave me a beautiful gold pendant necklace that was monogrammed on the front. On the back was 2-24-67, 8:15pm—the date and time we met. I loved it, and I still have it! I carved him large wooden tiki head and framed it for his room. Later in the '80's we burned it when we realized it represented idol worship.

I still loved my art classes most, and spoke with my art teacher about becoming an art teacher. She encouraged me, and I started looking at colleges with my parents. We visited two all-girl schools, Mount Mary and Cardinal Stritch. I really liked the art department at Cardinal Stritch, but just couldn't quite picture the all-girl atmosphere. I settled on going to UW- Milwaukee. Besides school activities, I was also active in our church youth group. In fact, my friend Denny Lauden (Who I had set up with my cousin Laura) was president and I was vice-president of our group. We planned dances and activities, and had devotions with Father Petra, our youth pastor. When we were told we were getting a new youth pastor, Father Breeze, I organized an event and designed flyers that said, "Blow Over and Meet the New Breeze!" Some of the adults thought it was a bit disrespectful, but Father Breeze loved it! Looking back I can see that was my

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start in promoting ministry!

One weekend Denny took me to the inner city where we picked up some kids he'd been mentoring; we took them to a party hosted at Marquette. Later that year, after he had been accepted at several prestigious schools, Denny committed suicide. He had hung himself and his little brother found him. It rocked my world. I had to navigate my own grief for my friend, as well as offer comfort and leadership to our youth group. That season had me questioning God and everything I'd been taught. Was it all true—really? I would spend another six years wondering.

It seemed I blinked and it was fall—my turn to head to college.



It all started with Mary Heiser and Pat Quinn

UWM



I was getting more serious about Bob, so I decided to save money and live at home while attending UW-Milwaukee. I paid for all my books, art supplies, and expenses and my parents graciously paid my tuition. I would be the first in our family to go to college. I decided to combine my desire to teach with my passion for art, and work toward a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree with K-12 teacher certification. It sounded exciting to me, and I thought I would love it.

Little did I know that it would be quite disappointing! It was the late 60's & early 70's—a strange time of drugs, hippies, woman-power, free-thinking, walking on the moon, inner city race riots, and demonstrations against Vietnam. In my mind when I think of my college years, I picture it as very dark cloud hanging over everything. I began wondering about all I'd ever been taught spiritually, and even questioned my values. Thankfully, God protected me throughout those years!

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ART CLASSES

My art classes were not what I expected. Instead of learning classic techniques and realism, the trend was “modern”—everything strange, ugly, and sometime grotesque and obscene. In my first drawing class I was introduced to nude models. That was truly a shock for a girl coming out of a Catholic school culture! And every time I created something of beauty—something you would actually display in your home—my grades would be low. I really needed that little piece of paper representing a degree that would become my ticket to teach. I finally caught on and decided to “play the game,” learning to do whatever it took for good grades. In Wendell Pugh’s design class, for example, my grades were often less than average. Once he rejected a beautifully-finished wall sculpture I’d created out of mahogany. I arranged wooden letters in an interesting, random, three dimensional pattern. I wasn’t used to have average or below average grades. I was discouraged and broke it up for firewood! Actually, I’m still kind of bummed that I didn’t save it.

In frustration, I went home and took my parents old yellow-gold draperies, which my dad had been using as drop cloths. I decided to turn them into two giant 3D letter “m”s that were about 4’ x 4.5’ x 2’ after they were stuffed with newspaper. There I was walking across campus with my arms through each m, holding

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onto the the middle section of each! I looked pretty crazy, I'm sure, and I was definitely taking a chance. Much to my surprise and delight, Wendell LOVED them! He twisted them and propped up them all different ways and exclaimed as he pointed out the shape, shadow, and form. I realized I was onto something, so I decided to stick with a similar theme. We had a large project due at the end of the semester, and it was worth a large per cent of our grade. I decided to take another big chance to try to raise my grade.

I stuck with the letter theme - this time I used the letters, "UAUUAU," all connected in huge bubble letters. I purchased black plastic used by construction companies. The final piece would be inflated to 8' x 24' by 3' high. After attaching the pieces with heavy tape, I inserted our old vacuum cleaner hose on one end. I thought it could be set to blow air backwards, into my monstrosity. It worked! I had what looked like a huge black cloud in our back yard as my test run. Then I deflated it and rolled it up, and put it in a large white sheet. I carried it across campus over my shoulder like Santa Claus, and in my other hand was our old-school vacuum cleaner. Parking was quite far away, so I struggled to get it there. Eventually made it to my appointment. I wondering what in the world I'd been thinking! It was nerve-wracking because this was to be a good portion of my grade for the course.

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When I met one-on-one with Wendell, we went into a huge empty studio. I began to inflate my crazy sculpture, and he climbed a ladder to get a bird's eye view of my creation. He just sat there on top of the ladder with his chin in his hand and stared at it without saying a word. I knew my grade was on the line. Suddenly he shook his head and exclaimed, "Diane, you have come so FAR! This is amazing! I'm going to change your grade. You will receive an A for this class."



Making the giant UAUAU with rollers in my hair!

Quite shocked, I left the studio feeling conflicted. I was pleased to have received an A because it got me closer to meeting my goal of being able to teach. But I most certainly was only playing a game for a grade, and couldn't wait until I was done with this nonsense called "college." I'm kind of bummed that I don't have photos of much from my college years—might have been good for a laugh. But maybe it's better to leave it in my memory.

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To say that college was not at all what I'd expected is an understatement. I was so disappointed to have art professors, who in their early years created beautiful, realistic works of art, but now succumbed to the pressure of society to create art that was abstract and meaningless. In recent years I came across the book, "The Naked Communist," written by FBI agent, Cleon Skousen in 1958. It was read to congress in 1963 when I was only 13, but they dismissed it as nonsensical. Clausen warned of deliberate action on the part of the communist party to infiltrate the US and topple it from within. He shared a list of forty-five lofty goals. Goal number 22 on their list was: "Continue discrediting American culture by degrading all forms of artistic expression." An American Communist cell was told to "eliminate all good sculpture from parks and buildings, substitute shapeless, awkward and meaningless forms." All these years later I have a much better sense of what was happening in the culture during my college years. If you read over the communist goals now, it's eery to see that almost all of the goals have been reached! I wrote a blog post about it. If you read it, you will see that most of the communist goals to topple the US from the inside-out have already been met.
<https://www.dianeoc.com/post/hidden-in-plain-sight>

I have only one piece of art in my home from my college classes. It's a wooden carving of a girl with a mandolin, and sits on our

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fireplace. I created it in the last semester of my senior year. My grades were high enough that I decided to take a chance and create something I would actually like to keep. My dad and I bought a piece of undressed mahogany, and he planed off the rough edges. Then we glued it into a block. I got out my mallet and chisels and started chipping away to reveal my vision of the girl with the mandolin. To smooth the wood in the tiny crevices, I borrowed one of Bob's tiny acrylic burs from dental school! His supervisor later asked him why his drill was running off center! Yikes—almost busted! Unlike everyone in my class who was working with stone or wood, I chose to sand and shine my sculpture to reveal the true beauty of the mahogany. I was pleased with my final product! And I actually received an A for my effort.



Girl With the Mandolin

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CERAMICS

I probably had the most adventures in ceramic class. We had a pug mill, which was a machine in which you added power and water to mix your clay. When I was first learning to use it I added too much and it kept coming and coming! Even though I had a large pink diaper pail to catch it, it started overflowing. Other students came running and we all did our best to capture it! Then I decided to take my diaper pail full of clay home to work on some hand-bill projects. The clay-filled pail was heavy and my car was way across campus. I found a metal yellow painting table with wheels and decided to borrow it. I managed to get the pail on the table and headed into the elevator, down to ground level, out the door, across campus, and onto the sidewalk along Kenwood Boulevard. There was a hill, and as I reached the decline in the sidewalk, the table got ahead of me. Suddenly one wheel got snagged in a large crack. The table leg bent, sending my pink diaper pail filled with clay out into traffic on Kenwood Boulevard. It tipped over and spilled lumps of clay all over the street! Traffic stopped as some helpful students and I scrambled to gather it back into my diaper pail and over to my car. Honestly, I don't think I would have made it through college without kindhearted souls opening doors for me, and helping me juggle a wide variety of huge art supplies across campus each day!

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CHEERLEADING

I became an 'art major turned cheerleader,' when I made the college cheerleading squad. It was fun, but the school was so large and it just did not have the same feel as my time at Dominican. The other art students liked me, but most were hippies and I really didn't quite embrace that lifestyle. But they liked me and some affectionately called me "Miss Pillsbury Cookie" cause I really didn't fit the mold in the UW art department.



UWM Cheerleading uniform

DELTA ZETA

I was also a pledge for Delta Zeta Sorority. When I was accepted, I was ushered into a world of fraternity and sorority parties, and often stayed overnight at the sorority house instead of driving home. It wasn't what I expected, and I really wanted to back out of the sorority before my actual initiation. Something about the fraternities and sororities just didn't feel right. But when I told my mom, I could see her disappointment. I think it had always been my mom's dream to be on a college campus and be part of a sorority. She reminded me that I had never been a "quitter." To please her, I went through with the initiation. To be honest, it was a creepy experience for me. Later, after I grew in my faith, I discerned an evil spirit associated with that ritual. No wonder it felt creepy! I renounced my participation, and asked God to forgive me for participating in it. I determined to be alert to God's gift of discernment in the future.

Sometimes it was convenient to stay overnight at the sorority house near campus, and I often did that on weekends or before an early morning exam. One night everyone was heavily sleeping after a fraternity party, and I heard banging on the front door. A guy was there telling me he was supposed to wait for one of my sorority sisters there, and I foolishly let him in. He exposed himself and grabbed me. No one heard me scream. Adrenaline took over—I knee'd him and kicked him in the shins. Thankfully

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he decided to limp back out the door! I was so shook up so I awakened our house mother who called the police. After taking my statement, the policemen expressed surprise that I had gone on the offensive. Our sorority mom just said, “Well, she’s a life guard!” as if that explained it! I couldn’t recognize him in any mug shots, and tried to just settle my mind and concentrate on school. I so wished Bob was closer, but we spent many hours on the phone that week. I was really tiring of all the drinking, parties, and especially the shallow relationships. College was definitely not like I expected. I was thinking I should have gone to Cardinal Stritch—and maybe I should have!

PROTESTS

Tensions were high in the country during my college years, and there were both race riots and political protests against the war in Vietnam. Once I even got trampled and my raincoat was torn while I was trying to get to class through a large group of protesters! Some classes—mostly history and social studies—were even canceled because of the protests. In fact, that kind of saved my grade point average in history because we had the option of keeping our grades as they stood without taking the exams. Whew! God was good! It was quite a relief for me because I’m sure my grade wouldn’t have been as high if I’d had to take the exam!

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Interestingly, the art department studio classes continued as normal. The trick was to get through crowds to enter the building. With the modern structure of the building, some of us were able to find a “ramp of sorts” that we used to climb up and enter through a second floor window. Crazy times! But even during that unstable atmosphere, I managed to find pockets of sanity, and generally life was good in my little corner of the world.

BOB IN DUBUQUE

When I was a freshman, Bob was a sophomore and had transferred from Holy Cross in Massachusetts to Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa.



Go-go boots!

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Now he was closer, but far enough away that he still could not come home as often as we would have liked. So our letters continued to fly back and forth—a second year of letter writing, and then a third.

I went down to visit him in Dubuque a couple times, and stayed with his cousin Ellen at Clarke College, the all-girl's college close by. Three years from our blind date - by my sophomore year - I was positive he was the man for me. Through all our letter writing during those formative years, we basically grew up together. We could talk about everything—and I absolutely loved his sense of humor!

Bob was accepted at Marquette Dental school, so when I was a junior at UW, he was living at home in Milwaukee. It was so much fun to have a boyfriend in town! Winter was great with skiing, dances, and Marquette games in the arena downtown. I also have treasured memories of boating, waterskiing, going to parties, movies, and just hanging out in the summers. We were starting to talk about marriage, and I was determined than ever to complete college in four years so I could get a teaching job while he completed dental school. I took a class each summer, and a full load of classes each semester to make it happen. I really worked diligently to earn that Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree with Teacher Certification.

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STUDENT TEACHING

Finally it was senior year, and time for me to get some practical experience. I spent one semester at Maple Dale school with the middle schoolers, and one semester on the south side of Milwaukee with junior highers. It would have been helpful to have more of a range of ages though, as I would be certified to teach K-12. Each student teaching experience was ok, but once again I was disappointed. I did learn a few tips and tricks that would serve me well, but just like the rest of my college experience, student teaching left me sorely lacking. But at least I emerged at the end of four years with that little piece of paper called a “degree” in my hands! It was my ticket to reaching my goal. I really wanted the opportunity to manage my own classroom and teach my students what I felt would be beneficial to them.

GRADUATION

I was so glad to be done with that chapter of my life that I decided not to participate in the graduation ceremony. The university was huge and they did not even read everyone’s name - they just had each department stand up! I told my parents it would be a waste of time and money. Looking back now, I realize that I should have allowed them the opportunity to celebrate the first person in the family to complete college - especially since they invested in my tuition! But they were grace-filled, and we

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had a small family celebration at home instead.

I couldn't have explained it back then, but looking back now I can see that it was just a very dark time in the country and in my own life spiritually. But God was watching over me. When Sister Mary Marcinus had encouraged me to ask Jesus into my heart in fifth grade, I did. I know that God had been protecting me through all kinds of situations where I could have gotten off track. He surely directed my steps. I'm so thankful that He holds us close as we grow in our understanding of His Grace and Truth.



At UWM

The Country Club



I told you about my mom insisting that I learn to swim. Well, I ended up loving it, and spent many hours at open swim, as well as taking diving lessons and participating in synchronized swimming [water ballet]. My mom's insistence really paid off! When I was a sophomore in High School I found out about life guard training and I pursued it. I practiced and practiced. We had to swim seventeen laps of the pool just to get into the class. It was rigorous training, and I passed!

During my junior year of High school, Mom helped me find job openings for life guards in Milwaukee. I was hired at the Milwaukee Athletic Club in downtown Milwaukee, and drove down every Saturday to guard at the women's pool during their open swim hours. It was my first job besides babysitting - which I had done a LOT of over the years! And the summer between junior and senior year, I was a counselor at Camp WeHaKee in Winter, Wisconsin, life guarding at the lake, and serving in the

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arts and crafts department. And in my freshman year of college I heard about WSI [Water Safety Instructor] training through the Red Cross. This additional training would allow me to teach swimming lessons. It was an extremely tough, rigorous course, and a friend of Mary Heiser's volunteered to coach us so we could pass. And she wanted those fingers pointing just the right way, and those legs positioned precisely—swimming lap after lap, over and over and over. Man, I thought I was going to die! But I persevered and passed.



Life guarding at River Oaks

In the spring of my senior year of high school, I applied for a summer life guard position at pools all over town. I really wanted to be outdoors at one of the country clubs. Every call I made and

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letter I wrote led to disappointment, as no one seemed to be hiring new people. Finally I had an interview at River Oaks Country Club in Mequon. I can still remember driving to Mequon, wearing my powder blue raincoat with a mandarin collar and ball buttons.



With Gary Somers at River Oaks

I was interviewed by the pool director, Gary Somers, whose eyes were as blue as my raincoat! He was a very bronzed college student from the University of Hawaii where he was preparing to become a marine biologist. Much to my amazement, he hired me! I felt very pleased with myself for landing such a great job with such high ‘prestige!’” Back then I was still a little social climber - very aware of people with money. It was my dream to

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some day be a married to a rich doctor and be a member at just such a country club!

I'm sorry to say that in spite of my great relationship with Bob, I was still a little flirty. My thinking was quite skewed from my time at UW-Milwaukee. I was definitely living for myself and searching for something—and our faithful God watched over me and often saved me from myself.



Laurie & I

I really enjoyed my summer at the pool, and being outdoors - it was a fabulous job! I was invited to return the following summer. Eventually I moved into the head life guard position. It was a really fun job, and I enjoyed all the people I worked with. Gary told me about an Evelyn Wood speed reading class, and I decided

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to do it with him. Wow! I could really grab a lot of knowledge in a short time after that course! I went out with him once when he was home for Christmas break, and he sent me a fresh lei from Hawaii for my birthday which arrived in the middle of the night! He was smart and really nice, but he was just not the man for me.

When Gary graduated and became a marine biologist, I was hired to be the pool director. It was fun to hire my own life guards! My favorite hire was Laurie Kuehnert, who became one of my best friends. Eventually I asked her to be one of my bridesmaids.



Taking the Woody out for a spin

One year when they needed someone to paint the pool, I recommended Bob and his cousin, Dick. They had started a painting business for the summers during the dental school

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years, and were in demand to paint houses. They took on the pool job, and it turned out great!

When I wasn't working at the pool, Bob and I had lots of summer fun just hanging out, going to movies, enjoying the boat on the lake. We hung out a lot with Bob's cousin Dick and his girlfriend Kathy, and had lots of fun with them. Of course water skiing was on the top of the list! And there was always a summer formal put on by some of my wealthier friends who were part of a high school sorority called ABX. It was always fun to be included on one of the guest lists, and I looked forward to that every summer.



Going to the ABX formal

Marrying Bob



In the summer of 1971, Bob & I took his dad's blue and white Lemans convertible and drove to the beautiful vista connected with the basilica at Holy Hill, north of Milwaukee in Hubertus, WI. He brought a picnic basket and spread a blanket in a meadow. As we sat down, he gave me a lovely little bouquet that his boss's wife created with flowers from her garden. I took a whiff of the fragrant flowers, and absentmindedly looked at the gorgeous countryside. At that point Bob said - "You really should look a little closer at those flowers!" Glancing down, I saw huge sparkle coming from the inside of the rose in the center of the bouquet! My engagement ring! It was there that Bob officially proposed, and I agreed to marry him. Good thing my lovely ring didn't fly out across the fields!!! My ring is a beautifully simple Orange Blossom setting, with a large center diamond surrounded by six smaller diamonds. It's so precious to me because the center stone belonged to Bob's grandmother. A Jewish woman at the country club once remarked, "Your ring is the star of David!"

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As we left Holy Hill to go back to the city for dinner, the Lemans broke down! We were able to drive in first gear and slowly went all the way to the Black Forest Inn Supper Club where his parents were having dinner. They congratulated us and asked us to join them.



Heading into church

Then we putt-putted our way back to my house in first gear, where my parents were also delighted to congratulate us. In a

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conversation between our moms, his mother said, “Well, I certainly hope they will wait until Bob’s done with school.” My mom answered, “Oh yes! They are waiting until next summer.” My mom thought she was in agreement to have the wedding after school was done the following summer in 1972. She didn’t realize that Bob’s mom meant to wait until 1974 after he completed dental school! Thankfully, the wedding planning began.



Mr. & Mrs

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At the same time, I sent out a gazillion letters to school districts all around the Milwaukee area, and received back a gazillion rejection letters. Months went by and nothing. Surely someone need an art teacher next year! I really needed that job so that I could bring in a steady salary while Bob completed his last two years of dental school. Finally I got a call from Grafton High School for an interview! I found out the reason I got the interview is that the school had just built a swimming pool, and they needed someone who could coach the girl's swim team. They also needed someone to teach art, as well as someone to teach a couple Home Arts classes for the Home Ec Department.



Laurie, Bill, Karen, Denny, Me, Bob, Anne, Dick, Carol, Clark
I told him just because I was a Pool Director didn't mean I could coach! I was never on a competitive swim team. But I could tell

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he liked me for the art classes and the home arts classes. He must have been desperate because he convinced me I could do it! I said yes to \$6,000 for my first year of teaching art, teaching home arts, coaching the girls team, and offering water ballet! Quite a unique combination. Yikes!

Bob and I were married July 22nd at St Eugene church, and since I was still the pool director at River Oaks, we got a great deal for our wedding reception. 250 guests join us on the hottest day of the year! It didn't dampen our spirits though—it was a lovely day.



The In-laws

That evening we took off to spend the night in Chicago and then fly to Jamaica for a week at a plantation in the mountains called Sign Great House. Eating under the thatched dining area with

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musicians playing under the stars was wonderful! One day we were horse back riding in the mountains and came across a tiny shack with an artisan who made exquisite deep mahogany furniture. Boy did I wish we could afford to send a piece or two home! After we left the tiny shop, a few natives yelled - "Hey white girl! Hey red man!" Not only was Bob's hair red, but I guess his face was pretty red, as well!



Replacing old roommates

When we got back we started settling in to life in Grafton. Our first little apartment at 1123 Woodridge was a new build, located just above the community swimming pool and not far from the Grafton High School. The apartments were all designed with either "harvest gold or olive green." We chose the one with olive green shag carpeting and appliances. We had started renting it in Mid-June to guarantee our spot so we were able to start nesting. We'd gathered lots of hand-me-down furniture, most of which I refinished. I sewed curtains, made pillows, crocheted afghans,

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and framed paintings. I had fun so much fun decorating and settling in to our stylin' new place!

When I was preparing one of our first meals together, I was pounding the head of lettuce on the counter, trying to get the core to loosen. Bob was in the other room and heard all the pounding. Upon investigation, he realized that I had purchased a cabbage instead of a head of lettuce! My mom had never served cabbage, so I guess I just thought I was picking up a “nice, firm head of lettuce” the way I'd been taught! Good thing Bob didn't marry me for my culinary skills! I'm so thankful he mostly “eats to live” and isn't a foodie who “lives to eat!” Whew!

In spite of my not spectacular cooking skills, we did have our cousin-friends, Dick and Kathy over for dinner. I remember coming into the kitchen the morning after one of our nights with them—on my little whiteboard was written, “The chicky was tricky and delish!” We had so much fun with Kathy and Dick. One time my grandpa had given me some frozen rabbit that he had trapped. He told me just to cook it like chicken. We invited Kath and Dick over to experiment with us. It was really hard for me to eat it. So to add a little levity to the situation, around the corner came Bob, hopping his way into the room saying, “I don't know—for some reason I just can't stop hopping since dinner!” Gotta love that man!

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For the remainder of the summer, Bob went back to painting houses, and I continued to work at River Oaks as Pool Director. I also began to gather all kinds of things for my very first classroom. One afternoon I grabbed a couple of my life guards and borrowed the River Oaks van.



Starting our next chapter

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We drove all the way to the south side of Milwaukee where I had been a student teacher the previous semester. I'd mentioned that I wished I had some wagon wheels for my classroom, and one of the students told me about a field where I could find some. I made a phone call and was given permission to take what ever I liked! When we got there, it was easy to remove two nice metal wheels, and I loaded them into the van. But I also had my sights set on an awesome, huge wooden wagon wheel. We pulled and dug and pulled, but it wouldn't budge.

Suddenly a HUGE yellow digger machine with a big muscle man drove up! It was the owner's son. After he found out who we were and what we were doing, he said he'd help. In no time, he dug the wheel out and hoisted it into the van! What were the chances of someone like that just showing up out of nowhere?!?! Then on the way home we had a flat tire, but thankfully had a spare. After our little adventure, the wagon wheel was safely delivered to my new classroom where I continued to set up interesting arrangements, creating an environment to inspire my students. I still have those three wagon wheels in our backyard today.

I finished the summer at River Oaks pool, but got talked into waitressing in the restaurant for a few weeks. It was definitely NOT my thing! It was confusing to keep everything straight. I knew most of the golfers from working at the pool, so they got a kick out of giving me a hard time, and made it more confusing

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than necessary.. The good news was that the more flustered I got, the higher my tips! Well, that was my first and last time waitressing! Finally I was free to seriously turn my energy toward my first official teaching position.



Photo in the newspaper

Teaching in Grafton



As the summer was winding down, I received notice of the classes I'd be responsible for. I would teach a couple of classes of Intro to Drawing and Painting, Intro to 3D Art, and Home Arts through the Home Ec Department. After reading the syllabus, I set about checking books out of the library on things like "How to Paint in Watercolor!" There I was with the piece of paper in my hand that said I was ready to teach, but had no experience with high schoolers, and no real knowledge of how to paint realistically! And for Home Arts I would teach things like knitting, crochet, and candle-making. Thanks to my grandma I knew how to knit, but I had to teach myself how to crochet and how to make candles! Thankfully I successfully used the motto, "Fake it 'til you make it!"

TEACHER OR STUDENT?

It took me awhile to react every time someone called me "Mrs. O'Connor." I hadn't really used my new name yet, and when I

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heard it, I kept thinking of Bob's mom! Honestly, on the first day of school, I felt like I should be going to my locker instead of standing in front of a class! I realized that I was only four years older than my seniors. A couple times I was mistaken for a student—once another teacher, who didn't recognize me, almost didn't let me walk through the lunch room! Each day after school I would head down to the athletic wing of the school to play the part of "swim coach."



Susie Rugg and I (far left) with our team

One afternoon, a football player surprised me as he picked me up, swung me around, and said, "Hey baby, we're gonna win this game tonight!" He was more surprised than I was when he realized who I was! Another time, a couple guys thought I'd left already, but I caught them skinny-dipping in the pool after swim

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team! They jumped out and scurried into the men's locker room, and I reported it the next day. Our vice principal was amused that I knew who one of the boys was— I had recognized his butt from seeing him in super skinny jeans! It was hard to live that one down.

COACH O'CONNOR

In August, before school had started, I was stressing over coaching. I knew I'd be OK with the water ballet team, but I'd never had the slightest interest in competitive swim.



Dry run with one of my water ballet groups

But God provided help. The new social studies teacher, Jeff Wagley, moved into the apartment building next to ours. It turned out he was the boy's swim coach, and really knew what he was doing. He explained some things to me, and gave me some

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drills to start off. Once again I found myself ill-equipped for my job, and I was learning new things every day. Fortunately, I was able to stay one step ahead of my students—both in art, and at the pool. The new Phy Ed teacher, Susie Rugg, was the Diving Coach, so we traveled to meets together and became good friends. I dusted off my “cheerleading skills” to encourage my team, and that year we won more meets than we lost. Not a bad record for the very first year Grafton High had a pool. Whew! I also coached the very first Synchronized Swim Team at Grafton. (Water ballet) They were a fun group of about twenty, and I really enjoyed them.

LEADERSHIP

The other art teacher, Bill Euclid, became the Art Department Head by default when I was hired as the second art teacher. The Administration had by-passed him and did not invite him to sit in on interviews, so he had no say in who was hired. Let's just say that he was not real happy to have me. And the head of the Home Ec Department was miffed to be told that an art teacher would be teaching classes in her department. So I had strained relationships in both departments where I worked each day. The students really liked me though, and often came to hang out during free times and after school when swim season was over. That actually added more tension in my relationship with the staff on our wing, and I could sense some jealousy. This was my

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first lesson in “360 degree leadership”—learning to influence from anywhere in the organization. Later in life ,as I learned how God shapes His leaders, I realized that we often have challenges or struggles in areas where God is moving us. Working through those struggles grows us from the inside-out. Thankfully there were lots of teachers in that school, and I hit it off with quite a lot of them. On Fridays, we usually met to hang out at a local tavern called Schreiners, just on the edge of town. We got to know the owners, and I was asked to do an ink drawing of their building for their menu—my first paid job as an artist. Bob would meet me at Schreiners on Friday nights, and we’d have dinner and drinks with friends.



Life as Mr. & Mrs O'Connor

DESIGNING SPACES

I settled into my classroom, and LOVED creating an inviting, inspiring space where my students would feel welcome. The art department was also responsible for two large display cases on either side of the office doors near the entrance. Bill used the display case to the right, and I used the one to the left. I LOVED arranging and showcasing my students' work. I changed it often, and people always commented positively. In fact, I later realized that I enjoyed designing inviting spaces even more than I enjoyed teaching!

My wagon wheel still life had a prominent place in the back of my classroom, and my students loved the story of the muscleman who appeared out of nowhere to help me dig the huge wooden wheels out! One day I grabbed Bob's old paint-stained work boots to use for a drawing lesson. The next day when I came in the boots were gone! Even though they were old, they were Bob's favorites—his most comfortable boots. I put the word out, pleading with whoever “borrowed them” to please bring them back. Later one of the students came to me and said he'd had a talk with the guy who took them. Apparently he was using them for hunting season and promised he'd return them when the season was over! Ah, the joys of teaching in Wisconsin! Sure enough—one morning, there they were! Bob was so happy to have them back, and I was out of the doghouse.

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MRS. "OMOCOMER"

My classroom was on the far west wing of the sprawling building. We had two large art rooms, each with a large storage room. Since we were not on the main section of the school, the bathrooms on our wing often had the faint smell of marijuana, which I recognized from my time at UWM! Across the hall were the Home Ec classrooms, as well as the Special Needs Class. I realized that the special needs kids were not getting art classes, so I took my lunch hour once a week to meet with them. One boy called me Mrs Omocomer, and one called me Mrs Oconomowoc! I loved their unpretentious, lovable natures and really enjoyed my time with them. But Bill Euclid was not happy I was doing that, and made a stink about it. So I finished the semester with them, but was told not to take initiative like that again.

HEADING INTO SUMMER

Toward the end of my first year of teaching, I was asked to also add Junior Class Advisor to my portfolio. I think I may have received an extra \$500 the next year for adding that responsibility. I was making big bucks! After class elections, I met with the future Junior Class Officers to talk about Prom. In those days, we hired live bands, and good ones were booked at least a year out. They decided on the Ozaukee County Jam Band, and we locked them in for the following year.

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As we headed into summer, I was asked to take on the Summer Arts Program for grade schoolers in the community. I stepped away from River Oaks after five summers there. I really loved my time with the littles! It was a refreshing change from my teenagers. I remember spending most of my free time glued to our TV. I was so shocked to see government officials lying and cheating! I had plenty of time to watch because I was creating a large Rya rug, an art piece stitched with a needle and yarn by hand, and it was a sunset scene. We framed it to hang on our wall. I'd been raised to respect those in authority, and here was one more thing about our country that I was disillusioned by. I wondered about raising children in a world like this. It was also a time of "gas wars"—sometimes with long lines at the filling stations because of shortages. And sometimes prices went down to twenty cents a gallon or less!



ARTS AND CRAFTS - The Grafton Recreation department is running an arts and craft program this summer under the direction of Mrs. Diane O'Connor. The purpose of the program is to spark and encourage a child's creativity by providing him with a variety of directed experiences with many different materials. It is designed to enrich his leisure time activities. Kristin Terwip and Kellie Singer are shown with Mrs. O'Connor, working on papier mache animals.

Jim Schroeder Photo

The Contest



The following fall I came in with more confidence in my role, and first semester was enjoyable and fun. Second semester was just beginning. One day Bob was dropping me off at school on his way to Marquette. It was early January, and we heard about a valentine's day contest for a popular Milwaukee radio station - WOKY. The winner of the contest would fly to Las Vegas with Beatle Bob Barry and his wife for a four-day weekend, going to shows with Diana Ross, Elvis, Jim Nabors, and Wayne Newton. At the stop sign, Bob absentmindedly said, "You're always making things, why don't you enter the contest and win us something?" I thought it was a great idea. My 3D class was just starting a project in which they would create 3D letters in the shape of the word they spelled. For example, the 3D letters T-U-R-T-L-E would be created, combined, and painted to look like a turtle. I decided to make a large valentine heart - about 3'x3' - designed with the 3D letters WOKY. I would construct the letters out of cardboard and masking tape. Then the front of the letters would

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be covered with hot pink velvet, and the sides of the letters in black felt. I worked on it in my classroom during breaks so the students could see me progress. I kept saying things like, “I’m going to enter this contest and win!” “I’m really going to enjoy that lovely warm weather in Vegas when I win this contest!” “I’m not that crazy about Wayne Newton, but I can’t wait to see Diana Ross!”



My groovy WOKY heart

On the morning they were to announce the winner of the contest, we were still in bed with the radio on. When Bob Barry dialed the number, we didn’t hear anything so our hopes were dashed ... but then ... it rang! I forgot about the delay! I went running out to the kitchen where our phone was attached to the wall. After he congratulated me for winning, he asked what I did for a living. I told him I taught at Grafton and that my husband

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was a dental student at Marquette. He asked what my husband thought about me winning. Without thinking, I announced to the whole greater Milwaukee area that he was actually in his underwear jumping up and down in the living room!

When Bob dropped me off at school, scores of students were excitedly waiting for me, saying, “Mrs. O, you said you’d win and you did!” And the principal greeted me with, “I suppose I need to find a sub since I hear you’ll likely be taking a couple personal days in a few weeks?”

We received plane tickets, hotel stay, tickets to four shows, and \$200. That was a lot for two kids on a tight budget! We decided to spend it on clothes instead of gambling it away. When we arrived at the airport, Wayne Newton had sent his limo to pick us up. He switched our hotel to a gorgeous room in his hotel. And beautiful flowers, champagne, and snacks sent by Wayne were there to greet us when we arrived.

Wayne Newton had also sent a note inviting us to sit in his private box for the show. Wow—I really felt bad for saying I wasn’t as excited to see him as the others! On the night we went to Wayne Newton’s show, the sweater vest I wore was knit by my grandmother. She painstakingly added an iridescent white sequin on every stitch. It was a labor of love, and one of many beautiful things she made for me. The skirt was sewn by my

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mom with a layer of sheer fabric flowing over a layer of soft satin. The night we attended his show we had a great dinner, and settled in to watch. Then Wayne's manager said Wayne invited us backstage after the show.



With flowers sent by Wayne Newton

His show was GREAT! In fact, I had to admit I liked it better than all the others! By that time Elvis was starting to look quite puffy, and I was really turned off by all the older women swooning over the sweaty scarves he threw out to the crowd! The other shows were pretty good. Of course I always loved Diana Ross so it was

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fun to see her in person. I wasn't a fan of Jim Nabors, but compared to his TV role as Gomer Pyle, it was amazing to see how well he sang.



Dinner in Wayne's box with his manager, Bob Barry & wife
After the show we sat down with Wayne in his dressing room. I was struck by how interested he was in this young couple from Wisconsin. He asked lots of questions, and I really liked him. Then he invited us to join he and his wife at his ranch the following day! He said he'd send a limo over for us. As we drove up the long driveway, you could see what looked like a sprawling mansion just ahead. The building turned out to be his stables! He raised and bred beautiful Arabian horses. The interior was also quite different than a usual stable—the walls and floor were

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tiled, and immaculate! There was no doubt those horses were his prized possessions. We met his sweet Asian wife, and enjoyed our tour of the grounds. When we got home, I had to admit how wrong I was about Wayne Newton. I shared with everyone how down-to-earth he was, and how much I appreciated his genuine hospitality.



After the show

Jesus Freaks



After we got back from Las Vegas, we settled back into teaching and dental school. We had fun chaperoning a school ski trip and Dick and Kathy came along to help. I really enjoyed being with the students for all the extracurricular activities.



DIANE O'CONNOR
Art 1, Home Arts, Art 2, Art 3, Head Junior Advisor, Synchronized Swimming Coach, Girl's Swimming Coach

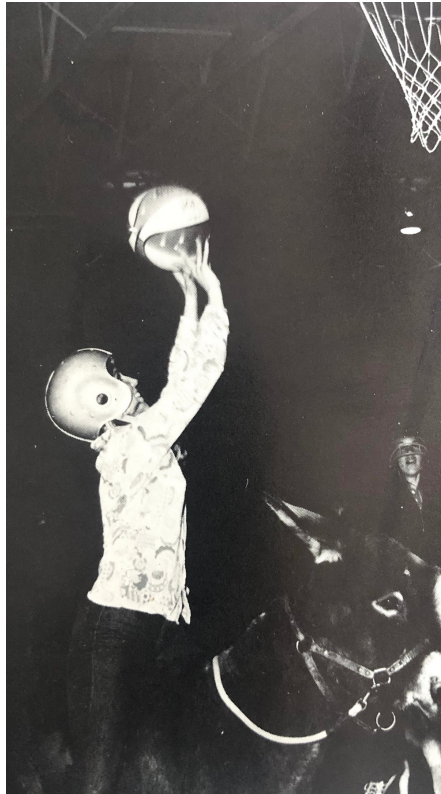


From the faculty page in the Grafton yearbook

I chaperoned dances, gave advice to pep club members, helped the students create decorations for events, and just hung out and listened their stories. I even played donkey basketball for a fund-raiser, riding a donkey up and down the court. And being up higher actually gave me a chance to make a few baskets! I was now officially the Junior class advisor. That meant I was

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responsible for helping students plan and pull off prom. I told you that we had booked the Ozaukee County Jam band for prom and everyone was pumped!



Donkey Basketball

As prom season approached, things started changing at school. I noticed that quite a few of my students had Bibles with them in my study hall—and they were actually reading them! This went on for days, and then one of the boys who was a real leader asked me a question about the Bible that I couldn't answer. He said,

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“That’s ok, I’ll ask the band tonight.” That piqued my interest.



Chaperoning Grafton Prom

I talked to him further and learned that “the band” was actually the same band we had hired for Prom! Apparently they had “found Jesus” at some kind of music festival the previous summer. Now they were holding nightly Bible studies with any kids who wanted to hang out! Pretty soon students started coming to me with all kinds of mixed messages. Some were excited about finding Jesus, and talked about their faith. But others called the band “Jesus Freaks!” The Jesus movement was sweeping around the country, changing the lives of so many

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young people. But many of the students were afraid the band would ruin their prom—what if they only sang “Jesus songs” now?!?!

One night I picked up the phone to give the band leader a call to talk about the students’ concerns. He said, “Oh Mrs. O’Connor! I’ve heard so much about you from the kids - they really like you. I’d love to get together with you and share what we’ve been learning.”



Circa 1973

That kind of freaked me out! I started thinking about past encounters with Mormons or Jehovah witnesses and I really didn’t want to go there. I politely declined a face-to-face meeting, but told him about the students’ fears. He assured me

that they would honor their contract. He said they would most definitely not ruin our prom. He said they would be playing the all music that the kids were expecting. And they were true to their word. They were really nice guys, and gave the kids a wonderful evening.

The whole situation certainly got me thinking about spiritual things again. The questioning of my faith had started back in high school when I was told the Old Testament was “just stories.” If part of the Bible wasn’t true, was any of it? My questioning had continued as I saw the mess of things in the world during my dark years at UWM. War, drugs, woman power—the radio blared “I am woman, hear me roar!” and the Age of Aquarius. Everything was challenging the values I’d been raised with.

But now instead of just being confused by it, I began to be curious, wondering what in the world was going on. Students seemed to be finding some answers for themselves. I was seeing unlikely students reading the Bible in school, and here was a band saying they “found Jesus.” They were actually taking time to connect with students, which intrigued me. And then Bob’s friend Clark came over and told us he’d “found Jesus!” He said he knew that God is real; he said he’d accepted Jesus as Lord of his life. He was definitely passionate. We weren’t quite sure what to make of it, but seeds were being planted in our hearts. My

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thinking was still quite skewed, but I continued to experience God's hand protecting me through some dangerous times of partying and drinking with both the Grafton faculty, and Bob's friends in dental school. Thankfully, God kept us safe, and soon whisked us away from Grafton.



A blurry circa 1974

California



When we were dating, the Vietnam War was in full-force, and the draft was in place. Bob's numbers for the first two years of the lottery were low, but when he started dental school he did not want to take a chance on having his education interrupted. He applied for Early Commissioning in the Air Force, and was accepted. They allowed him to complete his education; then he would be given the rank of Captain, and practice dentistry in the Air Force for two years. He was able to list three bases where he'd like to serve, and both of us were hoping for California. There were no guarantees, but much to our delight he was assigned to Vandenberg AFB in Lompoc, California! Of course there was no internet in those days, so we had no idea what it was like. We were just pumped that it was in California.

I put in my resignation at a Grafton and completed my second year of teaching. The administration wasn't too happy that I was leaving, but I was definitely ready for a new adventure. My dad

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had never joined a union, as as a result, I declined to be part of the Teachers' Union. No one prepares teachers to navigate the politics of an educational system. Perhaps that was part of the undercurrent I felt in both the Art Department and Home Ec.



Heading west

After school was out, Bob's Aunt Joan and Uncle Bud offered to let us stay on their yacht in Door County for a few days. It was our first time together in Door County. We've continued to visit that beautiful peninsula and it's one of our favorite places to go.

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I just release a sigh and relax every time we cross the bridge in Sturgeon Bay.

I'd been on the pill for awhile and I'd had a Pap smear come back with atypical cells. After a painful procedure, they told me I might have difficulty getting pregnant. I was so sad, as that was my main dream. I had always wanted to be a mom. When Bob and I talked about having children, we always thought we'd like to have two to four, and in that summer of '74 we were delighted to find out we were pregnant! I breathed a happy sigh of relief. Our life adventure together was about to get very interesting!



At Patti Schulte's historic tree

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Bob graduated from dental school and we celebrated! We were soon to be on our way. Looking back I can see that God whisked us away to protect our relationship, drawing us closer to each other as well as us to Himself. While not as crazy as our college years, the lifestyle of the hanging with the faculty on weekends was a culture that was still unhealthy.



Litcher's backyard, Santa Barbara

The Air Force sent over a moving van to pick all the contents of our little apartment. I went to stay with my parents for a few

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weeks while Bob drove down to Texas for Basic Training. It was only a few weeks, but I missed Bob horribly. And I was sad to leave behind Kathy and Dick as well as our families, even though my heart was leaning toward California. I flew down to meet Bob when he was done with Basic training, and we started our journey west, stopping at the Grand Canyon and Disneyland on the way.

Bob's second cousin, Patti Schulte and her family lived in Santa Barbara, about an hour from Vandenberg AFB in Lompoc. We stopped to visit and she was so delighted to see us. Patti and Joe had three teenagers who were pumped we were having a baby!

[After the baby arrived, we eventually took them up on their offer to babysit several times when we went skiing in the mountains.] Bob's foster sister, Marilyn, also lived in California in a suburb of San Francisco. It was nice to have a few connections in California, as I'd never been that far away from family. But it was good for Bob and I to be further away from family. It drew us even closer together, and firmly cemented our relationship.

We arrived on base to find out we'd been assigned to a very nice three-bedroom home—623 Arbor Street. All the homes in that section of base looked similar, having well-maintained yards with palm trees and succulents. The flowers were blooming, and I couldn't believe they were giving us a home to live in! It had

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wooden parquet floors throughout, and seemed HUGE to us after coming from our little two-bedroom apartment! We bought a couple patio lounge chairs so we had someplace to sit, and when the Senior Msgt assigned to us realized that our furniture would not be there for a while, he found us some “unaccounted for” twin beds to use since I was pregnant. I painted the bed frames, and we continued to use them for years as guest beds.

Bob was part of a large clinic attached to the hospital on Vandenberg. He went through several rotations for specialties and gained a lot of confidence and experience while he was there. Quite a few other young dentists arrived when we did, and we became part of a fun-loving group of young couples from various part of the US. It was a very different and special time. With Bob earning a good salary, we decided I wouldn't work outside the home, especially since baby number one was soon to arrive. I set about making that little house a home. One thing I wasn't expecting were the periodic missile launches. They shook the house, and scared me half to death at first! Since the base was located on the coast, I'd expected there would be a beach close by. But the base was huge, and occasionally we drove to the coast, but never went near the water. We'd been warned of people being swept out to sea by rogue waves—in fact, a young mom and her small child were swept away shortly before we arrived! So we enjoyed the view from high ground. It was a

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gorgeous drive to the coast, with wildflowers blooming like a carpet, and magnificent rocks and surf.



Settling in on Arbor Street

I pursued some creative activities and joined the other wives on base for various functions. I kind of missed my parents, but I spoke with my mom most every day. We also adopted a charcoal gray kitten named Dusty. She used to lay down on the floor and snag the bottom of my robe in the mornings, catching a ride as I dragged her down the hall! I joked that it was an easy way to mop

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the wooden floors. We built her a cat house covered in carpet that went from floor to ceiling, with shelves at various places for her to sit and a little house with a circle doorway where she could hide. Life was good!



Dusty

Birth and Rebirth



We settled into life on Vandenberg, connecting with neighbors, using the Commissary, and meeting with Bob's co-workers and their spouses. It was a tight-knit, military community. Before we knew it, March was upon us!



Taking Robby home in our '74 Pontiac Lemans

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I remember Bob and I sitting in the car outside Vandenberg hospital before we went in. Bob turned and said, “This is it! You know our lives will never be the same. It will never be “just the two of us” again! How very true those words were as we welcomed Robby into the world.

What a joy and blessing to add this little life to our lives! He looked so tiny as the large male orderly carried him to me like a football! Robert Kevin O'Connor Jr. was born on base and had the Air Force in his blood! Being responsible for this little life got me thinking more deeply.

I had always been aware of God in my life, and I told you earlier about Sister Mary Marcinus encouraging me to ask Jesus into my heart. The Catholic church stressed the importance of doing good things to get to heaven. I felt like God had a big scale to measure all the good things I did on one side, and all the bad on the other. I thought that if I happened to die when the scale tipped to the “bad” side, I'd miss going to heaven and end up in hell! What a frightful way to live!

When I was pregnant I had begun questioning lots of things in life. And now that I held this sweet little guy in my arms, my questions surfaced stronger than ever. I wondered, “What if I die—or if this sweet baby dies—would we go to heaven? Is heaven even real?” Suddenly I became afraid of

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death—extremely afraid. So afraid that I couldn't go to sleep without touching Bob at night.

Across the street on Arbor lived another young Catholic mom—Maribess—who had just had her first baby.



Family

A couple weeks after Rob was born we were at her house hanging out with them, and I asked if she was ever afraid of dying. She got this huge smile on her face and said, “Not any more!” She hopped up and disappeared down the hall, returning with a small yellow book with translucent orange fish shapes all over it. It was a small, paperback Living Bible.

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She had been reading God's Word and showed me where she learned that we can know FOR SURE that we are going to heaven if we accept God's gift to us. There it was in black and white: "I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may KNOW you have eternal life." [I John 5:13] I didn't have to wish or hope—I could KNOW. And as soon as she shared those words, my heart jumped for joy.



Shenanigans after work

Maribess sent me home with that little yellow and orange Bible and told me to read I John, and then start reading the gospels. The Catholic church had never encouraged us to read the Bible, and I couldn't wait to dig in! I had always known about Jesus, in fact I had asked him into my heart in fifth grade, thanks to Sister Mary Marcinus. But now I suddenly realized that no matter how

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hard I tried to be good, I could never really be perfect, which is God's standard. I began to understand that's why Jesus died in my place. I asked for His forgiveness for all the times I missed the mark, and asked Him to take over. What a relief!

The next day when I went back to Maribess' house, I had a new peace and joy in my heart that totally replaced the haunting fears I'd had before. And Maribeth said - "There's more! Everything that took place in the book of Acts is for us today. You need to read it—it's so exciting!" I went home and read Acts. Jesus told his disciples that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. And Peter said that the promise was not only for them but for all who would believe in the Lord. So right there in my bedroom I asked Jesus to baptize me in His Holy Spirit. Some strange words bubbled up in my mind, and I wondered what it was. I had never heard about anything like that. The following day Maribess and I were with another neighbor, and they were doing their best to answer my questions. They asked if I had ever heard anyone pray in tongues, and of course I had not. We knelt down together and they began to softly pray in tongues. My prayer language bubbled up inside me again, and I knew for sure that's what it was. I just wanted it to spill out, but I was too shy and kept it bottled up inside until I got home. In the privacy of my home, I let all my praise, and worship, and thanksgiving spill out haltingly at first, and then beautifully in a language I

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did not understand. I sat and rocked baby Robby while I rejoiced and praised the Lord with newfound freedom. And so my adventure with God began!



I loved being a mom

During my time in college, my thinking had become confused and conflicted when all the sexual revolution and “woman-power” messages were permeating the culture; God knew just what I needed to start my journey with Him. Maribess and I joined a group of women on base for a study called Philosophy of Christian Womanhood. We looked at all God said about women in His Word. It was a welcome relief for me! All the doubts that had been planted in my mind about the Bible being real were dispelled. And I felt a relief at finding others who had the same family values that I’d been raised with. I grew by leaps and bounds. All the snippets of scripture I’d learned as a child

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and teenager just came alive for me! The women I met with were surprised at how much God was revealing to me in such a short time, and it was the most natural thing in the world for me to share the good news I was discovering. Praise and worship became a natural part of my lifestyle.

Looking back after all these years, I realize that we had been impacted by the ripple effect of the Jesus Movement that had started in California and swept across the nation. God showered his love on those young hippies who were seeking love and peace in a confusing world with hate and war. My little yellow Bible with the translucent orange fish design was definitely the by-product of the hippie era that I'd been so familiar with in college.

At Vandenberg, Bob and I continued to go to the Catholic church on base, and we took turns staying home with Robby. One day they were doing something different during Mass. Instead of a regular sermon, the priest [who happened to be our next-door neighbor!] talked about a change the church was making. Instead of recognizing just “mortal and venial sins,” the church was changing it to “mortal, serious, and venial sins.” He said if we committed a serious sin we could just confess it to God—and the next time we went to confession we should confess it to the priest. When he was done talking about it, he did something I've never seen in the Catholic church before or since.

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Both of us were growing!

He asked if anyone had any questions. I raised my hand, and stood up. I said, “Father, you just read the Epistle that said ‘I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. I will forgive their wickedness and WILL REMEMBER THEIR SINS NO MORE.’ So Father, if I confess to God and He forgives and ‘remembers my sins no more,’ then why would I remember them to confess to you later?” Poor Father had no answer for me, and the whole church mumbled a collective, “yeah” ... No answer was given, and Bob was REALLY glad he wasn’t there that day!

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The more Truth I read in God's word, the more I was angry about being lied to by the Catholic church. I was even upset with Mary, as I'd made May altars and prayed to her as a child. But one day in my time with the Lord, the Holy Spirit whispered, "It's not her fault. She's really nice, you will like her!" And suddenly I remembered that Mary was a real person I will meet some day—and now I'm looking forward to it!

Bob wasn't quite sure what to do with all I was learning. I heard about the book *Late, Great Planet Earth* by Hal Lindsay and bought it for him. As he read, it basically scared him into making a commitment! He says his real commitment came later, but God was already leading him. As our time at Vandenberg was coming to a close, we were all set to move to Appleton. Bob would be going into practice with a dentist there, and we had a condo lined up to rent. But one night the Lord woke him up and told him not to go to Appleton, and Bob told me about it in the morning. My faith was fresh and new and I just said, "Well OK! I mean, after all, God promised Abraham he'd give him land, and basically told him to just start walking—He'd tell him when he was there! If He did that for Abraham, surely we could just start driving and He would tell us when we were where He wanted us, right?!?"

Bob called the Appleton dentist to say we would not be moving there, then canceled the condo, and finally called our parents [who thought we were crazy]. We put our furniture into storage,

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and stayed with my parents for a few weeks. Leaving Robby with my mom and dad, we prayed and hopped in the car with a few leads from a dental supply rep about communities that were looking for dentists. We began to drive around Wisconsin and visit, getting a feel for places that were options ... A few in the Hartford, South Milwaukee, West Salem, Clintonville, Tigerton, Wausau, Crandon regions. We were getting a better feel for what we'd like—a small town, but not too small; away from family but not too far; Bob preferred a group practice, but not too huge. When we drove up to Riverhill in Wisconsin Rapids, we immediately thought the clinic would be too big and impersonal like one we visited in South Milwaukee—and we almost didn't stay overnight. But the clinic tour was nice, and we went out to dinner with the five dentists and their wives. They were all Catholic, and we enjoyed our time with them. Bob was absolutely sure this was where we were supposed to be.



Riverhill Dental, 406 Daly Avenue, Wisconsin Rapids

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2220



Shortly after our dinner with the Riverhill doctors, we signed the dotted line— Dr. Robert O'Connor, D.D.S. would be added to the Riverhill sign! We looked at three homes in our price range, and bought the home we still live in today!



2220 Lovewood Drive

When we walked through the door, I knew right away that this was the one. The sun was streaming into the south-facing windows of the kitchen, dining room, and family room. It was in

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great shape and it just felt like home. It was listed at \$52,000 and we paid \$51,500. Of course it was over our price range, so we agreed to leave it “as is” until Bob’s practice picked up some traction. I blinked and suddenly here we were, unpacking boxes and working on settling in.

It was the fall of 1976. That year it got really cold really fast and the bustling little neighborhood we moved into quickly retreated indoors. The days were long and seemed dark. We only had one car, so most days I was tethered to our home—all day, every day—with an active 18-month old. I did not know anyone in town besides the Riverhill dentists and their wives—they were very nice but all in different stages of life. And we were three hours away from family. I found myself getting lonely, a bit overwhelmed, and kind of depressed.

One morning, Bob left for his new adventure at the clinic, and there I was, at home unpacking and amusing our “Little Mr. Destructo,” as I fondly referred to Rob back then. As I unpacked boxes, all kinds of thoughts ran through my mind, and doubts crept in. Had we heard right? Were we really supposed to be here? Is this really where God wanted us?

I opened the next box and there it was—my print of the girl with marigolds. I had forgotten all about it! When I was a senior at UW-Milwaukee in the final stretch toward my Bachelor of Fine

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Arts degree, I took a printing class. We were introduced to many types of printing, and always made extra prints of each design to trade with others. One “older woman” in my class made a lithograph of her daughter, and it was my favorite. But even though I loved this print, it had been tucked away. It never quite fit into my decor while I was in school, at our first apartment, or in our first home in California. But now it caught my attention and drew me in. As I stared at it, I heard God whisper “Look up.” As I lifted my eyes from the print, I realized the wall in front of me was dancing with brightly colored gold and orange marigolds! The print in my hand couldn’t have coordinated better if I had planned it.



God's Reminder

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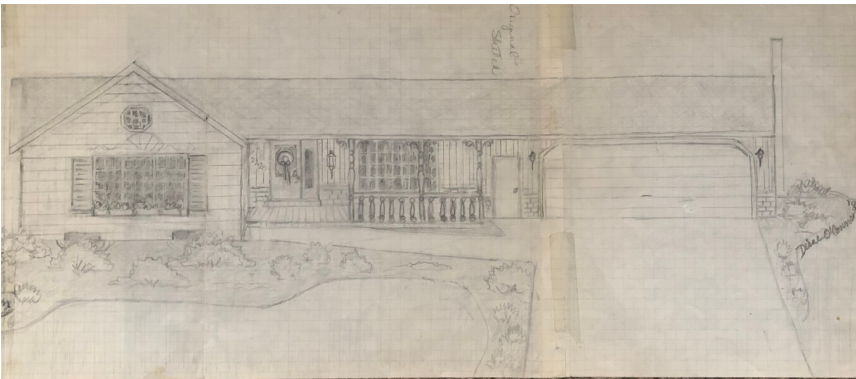
Suddenly I knew. Deep in my heart I knew. Yes, we had heard right. Yes, we were supposed to be here. No, God did not forget about me. This was part of His plan for me—a plan that He had in place long before I was attracted to this print and traded for it. Peace settled over me and I rejoiced! I quickly rummaged through boxes, found a frame, grabbed a hammer, and placed the girl with marigolds on the wall above my sink. That little print became a constant reminder that Jesus had not forgotten me. I was right in the center of His plan. He would help me settle in. He would take care of us. And yes—He cares about even the small things. I chose to have a positive attitude of gratitude, settling into my home and into our community. God is faithful!

We raised our little family on Lovewood Drive, and over the years our little home experienced quite a transformation. When we purchased our home, it really stretched our budget. And as our family grew to include three rambunctious boys and their easy-going sister, our little house contained a lot of energy! Little by little we completed small projects to make it our own. I guess you could say that our little house has undergone transformation “from the inside-out.” We started with the small family room—pushing the inner wall 4.5’ into the garage, widening the doorway from the kitchen, switching the little corner fireplace to a larger one on the back wall, and flanking it with bookcases. We also added a large bay window to view the

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backyard. And so it began, taking on projects to make it our own.

Over the years it was enhanced on the inside—new colors, crown molding, paneled doors, replaced windows ... until finally a big push was made visible from the street. In 1988 we thought about moving to a larger home, but the boys did not want to leave THEIR creek, and we loved our life on Lovewood. We prayed about what to do, as we definitely needed room to “divide and conquer!” Around that time I contracted mono and was bored as I recuperated, so I started dreaming and drawing. Our home was pretty boring from the outside—it was a dark colored, flat, straight-across ranch. I asked myself what I wished it looked like on the outside. If I had my wish I'd have peaks, a spindled porch, shutters, and flower boxes.



My little sketch became reality in 1989

Suddenly it occurred to me that instead of expanding out the back as we had considered, if we expanded out the front it would

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change whole look of the house, and I'd be able to add the elements I dreamed about. Kate's bedroom could become the Master bath and hallway with a large Master bedroom pushing out the front. Below the Master bedroom would be two smaller bedrooms with egress windows. Bob liked the idea, and we got some estimates. It was do-able!



Addition

Multiplication happened as one small bedroom became three—and a bath!

After many years of inner work through small projects, some of the internal transformation was now visible so anyone walking by could see it. The dream of gables, a spindled porch, and flower boxes had become a reality. At the time, I'd also been drawing lots of Victorian buildings, and decided to design something scroll-y to go above the window. I got out my little saber saw and

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cut it out myself! Much later, in 2010, we pushed the garage out eight feet so it could fit a full size car and extra storage. I also re-imagined the front of the garage, placing a narrow pieced glass window and flower box next to the garage door, and moving the door around the corner, out of sight from the front.



Family room, 2022

And it didn't stop there—over the years, ideas also spilled out into the backyard. Every year I imagined what our backyard could look like. One day in the early 80's, when Bob came home from work I was sitting in a rickety lounge chair reading my Victoria magazine while the kids splashed around in a little plastic pool. I said, "I bet you see a cracked patio and worn-out grass from the wear and tear of children." He nodded. "But I see

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a lovely ‘outdoor room,’ a beautiful deck surrounded by lovely flower beds.” Each year I would re-imagine the space. And thankfully the year we could actually afford to create something, I was envisioning a lovely semi-circular brick patio encased by raised gardens to form an inviting outdoor room. The bricks do not need maintenance like a deck would have, so that was nice. One year on a family trip to Kansas City I noticed all the beautiful fountains and decided to add one to our back yard. I just love my outdoor room!



Cousins in my “outdoor room”

LIFE LESSON: INNER WORK EVENTUALLY SPILLS OUT!

I scribbled these words in 1988 when I dreamed about what our dark brown, straight-across-flat-roofed ranch home might become. “If I were a house I’d be a little yellow house, with

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gables, a white spindled porch, cascading flower boxes, and candles in the windows. I'd be so inviting that if you were to pass by I would call out to you 'Come in, come in! Come sit down and share your heart.'" And just like our little house, our lives are changed, one step at a time—from the inside-out.

Everything starts with a thought. A vision, if you will. What might your life be like? Ask God to give you His desires for your heart. Take some time to imagine it. Write it down—dream a bit, and write down some details. Then entrust your dream to the Lord. Know that He will work to transform you from the inside-out, so at first you may not recognize that you are moving toward the future He has for you. But know that as you look to Him you will instinctively move forward, one step at a time. Along the way there will be course-corrections. So as He grows your heart, some details will change.

I've learned from experience that the results are always much better than your original dream, because God knows you better than you know yourself. Over the years I've continued dreaming and shifting my life as the Spirit leads me. So far, it's been an amazing journey filled with challenges and joys along the way. I want to always be alert and stand ready to "shift my thinking" and move in the direction the Lord leads.

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And I pray that I'll always be welcoming, just like my little yellow house with candles in the windows. "Come in, come in! Come sit down and share your heart."



Transformed

More Life Changes



By 1977 I was really settling in and making 2220 our home. Kathryn Lynn was born October 16th—entering the world bum first! I had really wanted a little girl, and even packed some little bows with scotch tape in my suitcase, hoping I'd get a chance to use them!



Kate - 1977

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My heart soared when I realized I had a daughter, and I praised God, marveling that He really knew my heart. But even though I was super-happy and content as a wife and mom, I really missed my little circle of Christian friends in California. I longed for Christian connection and had been praying that God would send a Christian man for Bob—someone he could relate to. While I was still in the hospital, another young couple came to Rapids to scope it out. Bob really liked them and he was excited that they might move to Rapids. Mike and Sue O'Leary were a direct answer to my prayers for Bob. Mike and Bob really hit it off. When they came back to town for their next visit, we went out for dinner. Actually, I'd broken my wrist skiing, so we went to Portesis's for pizza so Bob didn't have to cut my meat for me! As soon as Sue walked through the door I just knew in my heart that she was a Christian! Here we were—O'Connors & O'Learys, dentist & orthodontist— and both couples were wrestling with leaving the Catholic church. We were pumped when they told us they had decided to move to Rapids.

We had been going to St. Vincents, even though I longed to try a different church. But Bob's aunt was a nun, and his great-uncle was the first bishop of Madison! I'd been raised Catholic, but Bob was "Super-Catholic." I kept praying that God would move us where he wanted us—and that it would be Bob's idea. On Christmas Day in 1977, I stayed home while Bob took Robby to

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church. I remember it was a beautiful snow-glistening day with sun streaming through the kitchen windows.



1978

I was rocking Katie, praying in the Spirit, and singing praise to God for my sweet little baby girl, our wonderful family, and a lovely Christmas. But when Bob came home he was frustrated and said, “All that priest did was talk about money—on Christmas! That’s it—we’re gonna look for a different church!” No one was as surprised as I was that God was answering my prayers! A friend back in California had once said, “Diane, just put your husband in God’s nutcracker! Prayer is one side of the cracker, and the Holy Spirit is the other. That combination can crack any nut, no matter how hard it is!” So true.

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As soon as O'Learys moved to town, Sue and I started doing a Bible Study together. As other women came to mind, we invited them to join us. Soon we had quite the operation going! We would have the kids at one house and the study at the other. Somehow we found some sweet little grandmas from the little Pentecostal church who loved coming to stay with our kiddos.



Sue O'Leary, Selene Gilbert, Cathy Conger, Me

We all grew by leaps and bounds, and for years there was a steady stream of women in all ages and stages who joined us for our studies. I grew close to a handful of women during that time, and we've had a lot of adventures over the years. And even today I run into women who remind me how their lives were impacted by that simple gathering each week.

The first church we visited was the Assembly of God church in Rapids. Bob just wanted to "sneak in and check it out," but they asked us to stand up and introduce ourselves! That was a little

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too different than the Catholic church for us, and we did not go back. We visited a different Catholic church that someone recommended, but left half-way through when we realized this was definitely not the answer. Then one day Bob came home from work all excited about visiting Bethlehem Lutheran in Nekoosa. He heard they had an excellent preacher, so we went to check it out. I remember the message was “Thy Kingdom Come.” Wow. We had never heard anything like it! Bob said, “He’s as good as Billy Graham!” He was indeed a dynamic, fiery preacher, and we starting attending regularly. Pastor Jim Buckman was also an excellent teacher, breaking difficult concepts down really well, and showing us how to use the concordance to understand the translations from Greek and Hebrew.



Grandma and Grandpa Kristiansen

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Around this time I talked to Bob about tithing. He was worried about starting to tithe with all the debt we had because of starting his practice. We prayed together, telling God our concerns, and promising we would begin tithing when our largest loan was paid off. Much to our amazement, our loan was paid off WAY sooner than we expected! Bob had mixed feelings, however, realizing that now he had to fulfill his promise to God! But we started tithing right away, and have done so ever since. God has always been faithful to meet every need. No regrets!

Our parents were not pleased that we had left the Catholic church. Of course with Bob's family history, they were quite concerned. I felt like they kind of blamed me for encouraging Bob to "fall away from the church." Eventually things settled down, and over the years his aunt—Sister Anne—became our greatest encourager on that side of the family. My parents weren't really pleased either, but since my dad had been raised Lutheran and only changed to Catholicism for my mom, they were more accepting. They didn't understand it at first, but over the years they saw the fruit—they loved the way our little family was turning out! I remember my mom telling me years later that my life did not turn out at all the way she thought it would. She really thought I'd be a "country-club social climber," and she was pleasantly surprised with my shift in values.

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We loved going to Bethlehem and were there each Sunday and Wednesday night. The best part for me was that Pastor Jim actually taught on baptism of the Holy Spirit. I'd experienced it personally long before I found out that it could be controversial in a church. I didn't even know there were actually pastors and churches that believed and taught it! I was so excited! People blocked to the church every time the doors were open. It was really a wave of God's Spirit and part of a revival sweeping through our area. But Pastor Jim's teaching on the Holy Spirit eventually became a problem for him. The Lutheran church did not appreciate it. It was starting to cause division, so he stepped down as pastor of Bethlehem.

Here was a fabulous preacher/teacher with no one to teach or preach to! So I invited him to come do a study with our little group of women. Also, Bob and I started renting a room at Hotel Mead on Friday nights, and 150 people came the first night—just by word of mouth! I played the piano, and all those voices lifted in praise. Wow. God was definitely on the move in Rapids. I literally hung on every word Pastor Jim spoke. I became an encourager to him, and followed him around when he counseled people, taught, and spoke, learning all I could. People were saved and healed and delivered. And Pastor Jim was like my spiritual dad.

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I grew by leaps and bounds. Pastor Jim was invited to become the interim pastor at the Evangelical Free church in Rapids. We made the move with him, and were there every time the church doors were open. It was a bonus to have the church so close by!

We were expecting baby number three and hoped that adding another sibling to the mix would not be too chaotic. He arrived February 19, 1980, and little Jeffrey Ryan was exactly what our little family needed; he bridged the gap between the personalities of Rob and Kate.



Welcoming Jeff - 1980

We asked Pastor Jim and Bernice to be his baptismal sponsors because Pastor Jim had not yet switched to baby dedications. Pastor Jim and Bernice “adopted our kids” as their grandkids

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since they still didn't have any grandkids of their own yet. One day, toddler Jeffy had an open Hymnal in the pew, and pounded his fist in the middle, just like Pastor Jim!

I loved being a mom. I was so blessed to be able to be home with my three littles! We made forts, created art projects, danced in the family room, and did lots of pretending. Imaginations went wild with cardboard boxes and crazy dress-up clothes. One day I realized that Katie had walked down the whole block in one of my honeymoon nighties! Ah the joys of motherhood!



Christmas 1980

Sesame Street gave me a break, and Mister Rogers became my best friend for a season as he allowed Bob and I to have a conversation during lunch time. Every day as Bob left to go back

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to work, Mr. Rogers would be tossing his tennis shoe in the air as the show would wind down. Bob often turned to me, saying he thought he would barf if Mr. Rogers did that one more time! But the shoe was tossed consistently each day at the end of the show that kept our littles occupied while we had a few precious moments together during the day.



Family Fun in All Seasons

Lots of living happened, and before we knew it, our last little OC arrived November 22, 1982! Timothy James was super easy-going— a true delight added to our mix. The older kids loved Timmy, and he provided hours of entertainment for everyone. For a while, he even had his own little language that only the kids could understand. Timmy rounded out our family nicely, and we settled in to do our best to raise our sweet kiddos.

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1982

As a new Christian, I learned so much about parenting from Dr. Dobson's Focus on the Family on the Christian radio station every day; he played a big role in helping us raise our children. E Free housed Rapids Christian School, and when the time came, we decided to have Robby attend. It was a small school, and turned out to be very good for him. The curriculum allowed Rob to set goals, and each student had their own little cubical. Since he was prone to ADD, it helped him concentrate and stay focused.

One year when the kids were still little, I thought about volunteering some time to teach art at Rapids Christian School. That would allow me to be where my kids were, and also offer my skill to help the other students, too. Bob and I talked it over

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and worked out the logistics. I really enjoyed my time doing that. It was a great outlet for me, as well as doing other things like home decorating, quilting, stitchery, and high quality craft projects. But I wished I could actually get back into more serious painting.



Summer 1983

That was difficult to do with all my little people! I heard about a local artist named Gloria Janetsky who offered palette knife oil painting classes. I signed up for several classes with her. I learned a lot, and it was a wonderful way to paint! I went there for two hours each week for several weeks. We left all the mess at her studio and so I didn't have to try to navigate oil paints at home with four small children. One time, I invited my friend

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Mona to take the class with me, and I shared my paints with her so she could learn. Bob's dad really encouraged me in my art. In fact, he even offered to invest in me if I wanted to open up a studio or something! I appreciated his encouragement, but it was definitely not the right season to do that so I kept my heart centered at home.

We took trips to Milwaukee with all the kiddos, and we definitely needed more room in our vehicle. We finally bought a Volkswagen van which we thought resembled a big loaf of bread! But we absolutely loved it. No more squishing all together—we could divide and conquer!



Christmas 1983

O'Learys got a Volkswagen van at the same time we did without knowing it! And one Sunday morning, there we were in the Free Church parking lot, parked side by side! Ours was blue and theirs

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was a lighter blue-gray. Another O'Leary/O'Connor similarity. Eventually they ended up with four kids, just like us.

It was fun to visit grandparents, and the kids loved spending time with my parents in River Hills and Bob's parents in Whitefish Bay. At the time I took it for granted, but now I realize how unique it is for kids to experience the homes that each of their parents grew up in—not to mention that both sets of parents were still together! What a blessing to be able to pass on the stability that was part of our heritage!



With Grandma O'Connor

At first we tried to go down to Milwaukee each Christmas, but it seemed everyone took turns being sick at the holidays—a couple times Bob even had to leave me behind! One year he came home

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from work before we were supposed to leave for Milwaukee and each child had a barf bucket with a red bow tied on it! From then on we invited our parents up to Rapids to do with Christmas with us, and did more traveling to Milwaukee in the summer months. And as the kids got a little older, my parents made a point of having them come down and stay with them for awhile each summer. They invested time, and made lots of memories. Our parents also made frequent trips to Rapids, and we had some wonderful visits with them as we welcomed them into our delightful pandemonium on Lovewood Drive.



With Grandpa O'Connor

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One year, Bob and I went to a Bill Gothard seminar. God opened my eyes to basic life conflicts, and showed me how to react in a Godly way. I must have been quoting him a lot, because one day I overheard Jeffy arguing with someone. It was the classic “Yes you do—No I don’t!” argument, and finally Jeff blurted out in exasperation: “Yes you do! BILL GOTHARD SAID SO!” Over the years I used much of what I learned from Bill Gothard to help others. But in recent years, I’ve realized that along with the good principles we learned, the Gothard seminar also had an undertone of legalism, and unknowingly I began to be sucked back “under the law.”

Without realizing it, I started slipping into legalism rather than continuing in the beautiful grace and freedom I’d experienced when I first committed my life to the Lord. I had settled into living with “one foot in grace and one under the law,” with lots of “rule-following” followed by guilt and shame when my own efforts failed. Of course, now I can see that I was starting to act like the “foolish Galatians” Paul talks about. Thankfully, God has been re-teaching me the difference between law of the Old Covenant (trying to do things right by my own effort) and the grace of His New Covenant (God’s unearned, unmerited favor and blessing because I trust in Jesus to do what I cannot do myself.) He reminds me moment by moment to choose His grace over any guilt, shame, or effort of my own. “There is, therefore,

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now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.” (Romans 8:1) Even though the enemy would like me to get stuck, constantly focusing on the guilt and shame that the law brings, I will choose to lift up my eyes to the One who freely gives me grace. It's in Him that I live and move and have my being. (Acts 17:28) It's in Him that I find my purpose and experience God's peace and joy.

During this season, Pastor Jim continued to be like a spiritual dad to me. He asked Bob to be an elder, and I continued to be his encourager. In the 80's, someone told me about a spiritual gift test that Linda Henricksen from Christian Life Fellowship had used. I was aching to better understand my own life purpose, and asked her about it. She shared it with me, and I completed my very first assessment. It was unbelievably exciting for me to recognize the gifts God had given me! With Pastor Jim's blessing, I began to teach others. I was starting to realize that God designed each of us uniquely, and I loved helping others discover their gifts. Little did I know that God was planting seeds in my heart that would grow and multiply in years to come. As I look back at my life, I can see how God uses simple, everyday opportunities to grow us personally as we pass on what we are learning to others.

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Sibs

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Life on Lovewood



Lovewood Drive was a fabulous place to raise a family. Can a neighborhood be laid-back, yet bustling with activity at the same time—or is it a mind-set? We had friendly neighbors out and about, and children in and out. Our little house on Lovewood Drive was always hopping with energy!



Together—Everyday Moments

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I was so thankful that Bob and I had chosen a different, slower, simpler lifestyle which allowed me to be home with our children. He chose to come home every day for lunch, too, and I was grateful for a more quiet time to talk than our boisterous dinner time with all those little high-pitched voices excitedly sharing about their day.

In the summer time, the delightful noise of children playing filled the air. Biking between homes was a daily occurrence and there was never a dull moment at the OC's.



At Gilberts

There were sleep-overs and play dates, and LOTS of trips to the beach. We tried them all—Nepco, Wazeecha, and Arrowhead. I remember packing up everything including a pack-n-play to enjoy some time at the beach when Timmy was a baby. And as

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they got a little older, Bob taught everyone to water-ski, so we had many hours of boating, too. With so many lake options close by, we loved the fact that we could take a 5-minute jaunt to a lake and then head home for nap time. Such a difference from our all-day excursions growing up in the Milwaukee area!



Simple pleasures

One year I decided that the kids should have a tree house, and we built it next to some poplar trees near the swingset. We also used some rail road ties to enclose a large sandbox. Another time I went out and saw that they dug some holes deep enough to start a journey to China! Some years, with Grandpa Harris' help we planted a large, curved garden in the back corner of the yard. It was filled with green beans, carrots and corn, and edged with marigolds. But I wasn't a gardener at heart, and it was too large for me to keep up. After a few years I really lost interest.

Another year when we were supposed to take a road trip out west, everyone got chicken pox! So instead of going on the trip,

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we had a stay-cation. Bob was bummed, but decided that he and the boys would build a large shed where the garden had been. It's still well-used today, and brings back great memories of the kids, slathered with calamine lotion, all pitching in to make it happen.



Tree house

Each year in spring, the end of our driveway would completely flood—it was so deep the kids would come in soaked cause there was no way to walk around it. I even drove the car out to the road a few times when the bus came so they wouldn't be soaked! Then I had a brilliant idea to get some wooden pallets and make them

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a bridge! Their friends were pretty impressed that their mom built a bridge for them—ha! It worked well for awhile, and then eventually all the wood from those pallets turned into all kinds of interesting creations—from forts to skateboard ramps.



Time for school

Several times on beautiful Sunday mornings we had “home church.” We wanted our kids to know that church didn’t just happen in a special building but we praised the Lord wherever we were. I can remember them marching around the kitchen table with pots and pans chanting “Home church! Home church!” A couple times we had “home church” on a picnic table at Nepco Lake. Bob picked up some donuts and the kids settled in. It was a wonderful time of drawing close to God in his beautiful world while growing close as a family.

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Our friends the Gilberts moved in down the street so Jeff and Greg had lots of adventures together. Rob had a band of friends, but spent most of his time with Chris Goetter. They were always up to something, and those were the easy-going days of “free range parenting.”



Boys

Rob had introduced Kate to her best friend Michelle Swarick when he was selling chocolate bars for school on the other end of the block. She played with other kids, too, but she and Michelle were very close. Timmy followed around groups of kids on the block, but most enjoyed his time with Kevin O’Leary, and then Jesse Urban.

It was a safe and fun time for our children back then, as kids respected the authority of any of the adults on the block. Moms were around for supervision when needed, and the kids were able to play freely in the neighborhood, traveling back and forth

between homes.



Favorite pastime: Digging holes

The Fourth of July on Lovewood was always full of action. We packed in so much on that holiday each year! Looking back, it was kind of crazy! We started off at our house in the morning with decorating bikes and wagons for a Lovewood Drive parade. All the neighborhood kids would participate—Bob would even hook up the garden cart to the riding lawn mower so they could have a float! They loved presenting it to the whole block. Then it was time for water skiing at the lake. Later in the day, Gilberts hosted a fourth of July party for dinner, with food and games for the whole family. Finally, it was time for fireworks at the river, followed by more fireworks at home. Whew! No wonder Bob and I were always exhausted after that!

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Tradition

In the woods across the street, Two Mile Creek meandered along, paralleling Lovewood Drive. The boys had lots of adventures in those woods, as well as across 20th Street at “the hills.” As series of bike paths had been worn in the area next to the creek, and they spent many hours there, riding and exploring. There was also a larger hill for sledding in that area, and it was great that they could walk over for awhile before returning for hot chocolate. As the kids got older, they loved to sled at Bloody 07, which was not for the faint of heart. We got them cross country skis, and also took them downhill skiing. Several times we stayed in Ed and Lois Canton’s lodge—we could ski right out the door

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and be on the hills of Telemark! It was a fun family-time away. And the best? Bob helped the kids flood the side yard to make a large skating rink. They loved it, and were out there hitting pucks around the ice for hours. They even rigged up a light so they could skate at night. One year, Jeff saved up his money and bought an old beater of a snowmobile. I remember a blue haze of oily-smoke following him as he circled the house again and again and again—and again! Later Bob got a more reliable snowmobile for the family.



Lake Wazeecha

Winter evenings bring to mind some of my favorite memories of time spent together in our family room. We regularly made fires in our fire place—and sometimes we even roasted marshmallows!



Marshmallows

Stories were read, and kids played, while Bob read the paper and I crocheted or worked on a stitchery. Don't get me wrong - with three rambunctious boys, life wasn't all calm and sweet! In fact, I commented more than once that God had a sense of humor to give me three boys when all I knew growing up was one sweet little sister who was seven years younger than me! There were plenty of wrestling matches—and even planned “sock fights.” The boys (and Bob) would stack up the large pillows to serve as bunkers in the family room. Then everyone would grab their socks and roll them into balls to lob at each other! Quite the scene.

The boys loved camo, but in those days, camo clothes were not available in children's sizes. They would make trips to any army

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surplus store they could find to pick up gear of all kinds. One year I remember Katie sighing and saying, “Mom, there’s war all over the living room!” She and I retreated to play some “girl things” back in her room. At first I felt bad that she didn’t have a sister, but she went out and adopted one in Michelle, and I do think that growing up with the boys helped form her even, go-with-the-flow temperament.



With cousins Mark and Wes

We also had multiple trips to the ER with all kinds of injuries that required stitches and/or casts. In fact, think we may have funded a good portion of the new ER addition to Riverview Hospital! I probably could have dedicated a whole chapter to mishaps and injuries, but those can be their stories to tell. At any rate, I felt that the guardian angels assigned to the O’Connor household were working overtime; I could just picture them sitting down with a sigh when everyone was tucked safely in bed

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each night! There's no doubt that God protected each one many times over the years, saving them for the wonderful plan He had for each of their lives.



Just like Dad

In the 80's, our phone was mounted on the wall in the kitchen. It never failed—as soon as I was deep in conversation, the kids would be doing something annoying or crazy, just outside of reach. I would find myself pantomiming to them to stop, and they would pretend they couldn't tell what I meant. One day when I was at Ace Hardware, I saw a 25' phone cord. I was so excited! I brought it home and changed the cord that night. The next day when the phone rang, the boys started in on their usual silly song and dance. They were so surprised when I was able to follow them down the hall all the way to their bedroom and grabbed their shirts by the collar! The look on their faces were

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priceless!

In the evenings, Bob would play his guitar when it was time for bed. “Good night Robby, Farewell, Katie, Sweet dreams Jeff & Tim, It’s sad to see you go! Ba-boom, ba-boom ... Hope you had a happy day, happy day, happy day! Hope you had a happy day, cause I had a good day too!”



Kate as Clara

Kate was in dance, and one year Bob and I were “parental units” in the Nutcracker production. Another year Kate got the role of Clara, sharing the part with another little girl. They each did two performances. I made two identical costumes for them. The sewing machine was in the living room at the time, because we were adding on our master bedroom and bath. After storing sofas and tables in the garage, we had temporarily moved our bedroom

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to the living room. Imagine the looks of surprise when we answered the front door and invited people into our bedroom!

On Friday nights we often had praise nights with other couples, and we took turns hosting. There were guitars for soft worship and lots of sharing—scriptures, lessons learned, and stories of God's faithfulness. We got very close to other young couples in the same stage of life—O'Learys, Gilberts, Siewerts, Congers, Wuerffels ... Over the years I've had wonderful times with Sue O, Cathy, Selene, Sue S, and Karen Kensel. We went to lunch, organized shopping days, and for many years I planned a once a year stay at Scott Wessel's home in Door County. It was always a wonderful time of growing and sharing. I'm so very thankful to have these long-standing friendships!



Karen, Sue O, Me, Sue S, Selene - Door County

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Sharing My Faith



Over the years, God has given me many opportunities to share my trust in Him with others. It started at home, with many everyday, ordinary moments and little snippets woven into commonplace conversations. It was natural to talk about God's goodness in our lives and how we've chosen to follow Him and live out our values.



1987

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God also encouraged me to share my faith beyond our family, and gave me many opportunities right on Lovewood Drive and in my circle of influence. Sometimes He even gave me the privilege of praying with a few people to receive Him as their Savior and Lord of their lives. Here are a few stories:

JOANIE

My next-door neighbor to the west, Joanie Gruthoff, came to our back door to borrow a cup of sugar one day. I'd been singing and praising the Lord while I worked around the house. I invited her in and we had a wonderful conversation. I ended up telling her my story about baptism in the Holy Spirit. She was fascinated, and went home to read the book of Acts. Later she excitedly shared that she experienced baptism in the Holy Spirit, too! There was quite a move of God's Spirit here in our area at that time and we were in the middle of it!

SYLVIA

The Gruthoffs moved, and God placed a new family next door. The Riverhill wives hosted a little brunch at Bulls Eye Country Club for our friends and neighbors each year, and I remember chuckling and telling Bob I was "going off to my mission field at the country club." When I was in the ladies' room, I heard some sniffing coming from one of the stalls. When the woman came out I realized it was Sylvia Baldock, my new neighbor next door. When I asked what was wrong, she said she'd hit and killed a

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squirrel on the way over! Her heart was tender, and I shared about Jesus' love for her right there in the country club ladies' room! She came over later, and as we stood in the driveway talking, the kids were running in and out and around us having a squirt gun fight! In the spite of total pandemonium, she asked me more about Jesus. I had the privilege of praying with her, right there in the middle of total chaos, and she turned her life over to the Lord! Isn't that just like God to meet us right where we are? He brings inner peace to our hearts even though may be outer chaos all around us.

KRISSY

One summer day, a little girl knocked on the door and asked if we had any babies she could play with! It was nine-year-old Krissy Olson, who lived across the street and longed to join in on all the O'Connor hoopla. She played with baby Jeff, and later Timmy, taking them on stroller rides. She followed me around constantly, and continued to hang out for years. She became an extra set of hands for me as our little family grew. Eventually she became our trusted babysitter. One day when the older kids were off playing and Timmy was napping. Kris was helping me weed the garden. She had been watching us as a family, and felt something was different. She asked some questions and as we weeded, I told our story. I was able to stop and pray with her, right there in the garden, where she asked Jesus into her heart.

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Later, we brought her to CLF's Heaven's Gates, Hell's Flames, and that helped solidify her faith. When I learned to play the piano by chord, she longed to play freely and worship too, so I did the best I could to teach her. Sure enough! God gave her that gift, and she still plays on our worship team. As she she grew older, I included her in ministry as I worked with teens. And eventually I asked her to help me start Access, a ministry for young adults. It was amazing to see how Kris grew up to become one of my best friends!



Kris and I in our Access Ministry days

JOAN

My neighbor to the east, Joan Vilbaum, was very sweet. She had a son a year older than Rob, and a baby girl the same age as Kate. When Katie was a little over a year old, Joanie was diagnosed with a brain tumor. I remember God telling me to go over and share my faith story. I was nervous, thinking I didn't want to

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intrude, and I wasn't sure how she might respond. But I went over, and as I talked, tears streamed down her face. She said that everyone else was tip-toeing around her, but when I shared my story, it was exactly what she needed to know! I was able to pray with her so that she had a true assurance that she would be with Jesus in heaven. One night, she came with me to a praise night at the Assembly of God on Baker Street. Even though she was weak, we managed to get her over there. At one point, I looked over and she stood up, raising her hands in worship with her face absolutely glowing! Later I asked if she usually raised her hands in church. She said, "Oh my goodness, no—Never! Wasn't it wonderful?" God had really touched her heart!

Later, her husband Dale came over devastated. Joanie had slipped into a coma and was in intensive care in Marshfield. He sobbed that he wasn't ready to let her go—that there was so much more he wanted to say to her, and things he needed to know. After he left, I sensed that God wanted us to go to the hospital, lay hands on her, and pray she came out of the coma. We went to Marshfield and there, with nurses watching behind the glass in the ICU, we anointed her with oil and prayed that God would raise her up so she could go home and be with her little family again. I felt kind of foolish, as they had told us she was dying, but I did it because God told me to. Much to our surprise and delight, Dale called the next day, shouting that she

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woke up! She was coming home! I had hoped it meant she would live many more years, but God chose to take her home after a few more months. But Dale was so very grateful for the extra time he was able to spend with her.

MONA

With four kids bursting out of our little house, Bob & I decided I could use a little help—another set of hands, so to speak. We found Mona Main who came to help me clean once a month, and babysat overnight occasionally when Bob and I were able to get a night or two away. One day, as she was helping me clean the house. She was busy polishing the base of the dining room table, and I was making us a little lunch. She asked me how we happened to move here, so I began to tell my story of being afraid, questioning my beliefs, and how God moved us to Rapids after I'd chosen to put my trust in Him. Soon I heard some sniffing coming from under the dining room table! I said "Mona, are you ok? Come sit in the kitchen and let's talk." Before I knew it I was praying with her to ask Jesus into her heart! And in that instant it blew me away, because I had been talking to the Lord about how cool it was that some women actually lead others to the Lord "at their kitchen tables!" I'd been telling Him I wished I had that opportunity! A few months later Mona was baptized as a sign of her faith, and she was one happy girl! She is still faithfully serving the Lord today.

WOMAN AT THE CONFERENCE

One year, Bob and I went to a Christian conference in Chicago. We were just beginning to learn about spiritual gifts and we enjoyed the sessions with the speakers. At dinner time, we were in a huge room, and Bob and I sat down at a random table. All through dinner I kept hearing in my head, “The woman next to you is Catholic, talk to her.” Normally that’s not a problem for me, but I was stuck on the phrase, “She’s Catholic.” I started asking myself, “How could I know she’s Catholic, this is weird. Is she Catholic? What if she’s not Catholic?” And on and on. By that time the speaker came up, and I didn’t get a chance to talk with her. When I got back to my room I was asking the Lord about it, and I realized He had given me a word of knowledge. It was the first time that happened, and there was no way I could have know that on my own! I begged Him to let me find her in the huge crowd the next day; I promised I would do what He told me to do.

The next day I looked for her everywhere, and I was so sad that I didn’t see her. It was the last day of the conference so I thought I missed my opportunity. Bob and I were late for dinner that night, and only single seats were left. We ended up sitting at different tables. I slid into a seat, and when I looked up, there she was, ACROSS the table! Oh man—this was harder than having her right next to me! I prayed, and toward the end of the meal

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the woman next to her got up and left! This time I didn't hesitate; I slipped into the seat next to her and blurted, "You're Catholic, aren't you? God wants you to know that He loves you and He has a plan for your life. I was Catholic, too, so I understand. We can't work our way to heaven—We must simply put our trust in Jesus—the good news is that it's all a gift He freely gives us." At that point, tears were streaming down her face. She said she'd come to the conference looking for answers. She said the speakers were good, but something was missing. But that I had just told her what her heart longed to hear! I prayed with her, and never saw her again. But I left, determined to act immediately from then on! If I heard God speak, I would not question it or try to reason it away; I would just do what He told me to do immediately!



In the 80's

Devastation



I grew in my faith by leaps and bounds and I was aware of wonderful “God moments” all the time. Life seemed perfect. But then in 1986, I experienced DEVASTATING rejection from Pastor Jim. I sensed conflict with his daughter, Jamie, and invited her over to work it out. She told me she was jealous of my relationship with her dad; he listened to me, but not to her. And she was shocked that I hadn’t invited her over to fight! In their house, they never had a peaceful discussion. We prayed, and parted on good terms.

After my healing conversation with Jamie, Pastor Jim called me and reamed me out for talking with her and “taking advantage of the fact that Bob was an elder.” I’d never experienced anything like it! I could hear his soft-spoken wife in the background slamming cupboard doors and talking loudly. He accused me, saying someone had told him I was against him. I couldn’t believe it. When I hung up the phone I was shaking violently, and

that night I couldn't sleep. So many times I'd encouraged him—and had even made excuses for him to others when his demeanor felt cold or indifferent. I justified his behavior, because his teaching was excellent and I was learning so much. But eventually, Bob and I were becoming concerned at some of the things he'd begun to teach. Pastor Jim exhibited paranoia, and accused me of coming against him, stirring up trouble in the church. Even though I had questioned some things, in my heart I thought I was still loyal to him. Why hadn't he just come and talked with me about it? I didn't understand how someone who preached the truth could act in such a hurtful way. It rocked my world!

Bob heard the phone call, and we were both extremely shaken. I cried my eyes out, and prayed with some trusted friends who helped me try to process all this when it was happening. If I saw Pastor Jim in a store, he would turn and go a different way. It was an awful time, and one of those life-altering experiences. Bob and I went in to talk with him about our concerns, and for our own health and peace of mind, we told him we felt we were supposed to leave. We did not want to be the cause of conflict. The worst part for me was that he hugged Bob, but wouldn't even look at me. I had never experienced rejection like that in my life. Afterwards, I had dreams about getting a hug from him.

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During this season, God taught me that forgiveness is a choice, and that I needed to guard against a seed of hurt sending down a huge root of bitterness. And because of that experience, I fiercely guard my relationships and work diligently to “be at peace with all men.” (Romans 12:18)

EVERGREEN

God placed us at Evergreen Assembly to be loved, healed, and restored, little by little. During that awful time, we felt torn away from our “church family.” I felt kind of like a child experiencing divorce who is taken away from the family they love, and sent to live with other relatives. The relatives were nice, but definitely not the same. Little by little, though, peace and joy returned to my heart.

I desperately wanted to learn to play the piano by chord so that I could worship with the beautiful choruses and not be tied to sheet music. I tried and tried to no avail, and was ready to give it up. But one night, Bob encouraged me and told me to keep going. I sat back down, and God literally just gave me the gift! Suddenly I was free to just use the whole keyboard without being tied down to notes on a page. I was playing, “Set my spirit free, that I might worship Thee” and it was just flowing out! What a blessing! I began to play on the worship team, and that little church loved me—mistakes and all.

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Before I go further, I should tell you that eventually I did get a hug from Pastor Jim—years later. We had joined friends at Lake Wazeecha to welcome home some missionary friends, and when I saw Pastor Jim, he actually smiled. I said, “I’m hugging all my old friends—can I get a hug?” And I did get a genuine hug. At least when I see him in heaven now, it won’t be awkward!

I still don’t really understand everything that happened, but I have realized that Satan often tries to divide the very people who care the most about a ministry. God is all about unity - after all, three Persons in one God is the ultimate in unity! So Satan does everything he can to divide—marriages, friendships, churches organizations, and countries. And he does it through deception and lies. It’s up to us to guard our relationships, be alert to the root of any conflict, and reject it.

It’s never been quite the same as that wonderful season of our lives. We realize now that being with other couples in the same stage of life was a special gift from the Lord. We sharpened and encouraged each other, and as we grew in our parenting skills, God was shaping our values. In spite of leaving the Free Church, we’ve stayed in contact with our friends through the years. It’s so good to know that you have people you can always count on, no matter where life takes you.

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Late 80's

SCHOOL CHANGES

We always prayed over each of our children, and felt that Rob should be at East Junior High when RCS closed in 1988. He went there for seventh, eighth, and ninth, and then continued at Assumption where he loved the whole high school scene. He really enjoyed football!

We placed Kate, Jeff, and Tim at Community Christian Academy, and once again I volunteered my time. I set up another Art Department, and also worked to help establish the new school. I used our art exhibits around the community to become “an ambassador,” promoting the school.

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Letty Rasmussen had been an older woman in my life at the Free Church. She always had words of wisdom to encourage me in motherhood. And then at CCA, I met Madeline Smith, the first grade teacher. She was positive and delightful, and was a very encouraging influence to me during this time.

In '89 I got mono, and God brought me to a dead stop. I realized how precious true friends were during this time, and how God uses the body of Christ to help in times of need. [This is also when I designed the addition to our house.]



1986

Christian Life Fellowship



In the summer of 1990, I was on the beach at Lake Arrowhead with Sue O’Leary and all our kids. She was still at the Free Church, and we were still at Evergreen. I jokingly said, “I’ve heard such good things about Christian Life Fellowship these days, maybe we should both re-connect over there!” [Congers and Siewerts had gone to CLF] Even though I was joking at the time, the thought stayed with me, and I talked to Bob about it. We both wanted a place where our kids could experience the Lord with other kids the same age, and we were finding that Evergreen was too small for that. We prayed about it, and God impressed us to switch to CLF for our kids, especially as they were starting to become teens.

Ironically, when CLF was just starting, Pastor Gayland and some of the founding elders met in our home with Pastor Jim. We talked about what it could look like to start a “New Testament Church,” wondering if we might work together. But it was not to

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be. To this day, I still believe that Pastor Jim would have thrived in a traveling preaching/teaching ministry, rather than deluging one small church with his constant end-times messaging. After we left the Free Church, we did not feel led to go to CLF, even though that's what I had been hoping for. God knew I need the healing that Evergreen would provide.



CLF Directory

But now I was very excited that God released us to join CLF! This time, we changed churches with the blessing of our pastor at

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Evergreen. He told us we were God's, not his, and needed to be where He wanted us! What a difference from leaving the Free Church!

We loved CLF and fit right in, even though we still missed the closeness we had with friends at E Free. By this time, we realized that no church was perfect, but we decided that we would make a strong commitment this time, and become members at CLF—for better or worse. Gayland Henricksen was the pastor at the time, and was one of Bob's patients. A few years earlier, he had told us we could send the kids on Wednesday nights for Ranger—no strings attached. The boys loved Rangers! Again, this was so different than the possessiveness we had experienced before.

Soon after we arrived, Pastor Gayland and Linda moved on. Pastor Dean and Leata (Linda's twin) moved into the leadership role. Little did I know how much they would impact my life in years to come! Pastor Chuck, the youth pastor at CLF, was a huge influence on me during this time. I helped with teens a bit, and loved having the opportunity to pray and disciple. I also stepped in to play the piano when Pastor Chuck and Joy began to lead the main church from organ/piano to the worship band. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was actually helping with "ministry development" as CLF transitioned from organ/piano to contemporary worship teams. This would later become a theme in my life. Then, when Pastor Paul and Dawn came to town, the

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Lord released me from the worship team, and I focused on other ministries.

CLF was known for they high quality musical outreach events. Julie Overturf called to ask for help designing some large scale sets, and I loved being involved. At the time, I didn't realize that Julie would be come a key person in my life. My artistic talents were being recognized, and when CLF purchased the teen center in Port, and Dan Frye was added to staff, I worked with students to do some large murals on the walls.



One of the sets at CLF

I Will Teach You



When we started going to CLF it was the early '90s, and I was still teaching art at CCA. I desperately wanted to clarify my calling and serve the Lord with everything I had. I began thinking about different things I might do. At the time, I longed to impact young adults. It just “seemed logical” to me that I should teach at the college level. And it “seemed like” earning a Master’s degree should be my next step.

MY DREAM

I longed to earn my Master’s degree and maybe a doctorate so I could teach in a university setting where I could impact young adults. [I also thought that “Dr. & Dr. O’Connor” would sound pretty great!]

I almost moved ahead of God’s timing as I began to investigate graduate opportunities here in central Wisconsin. But God clearly whispered to my heart, “No. I will teach you what you need to know—character comes first! Going to UW-Stevens

Point right now would remove your heart from the center of your home—and that's where it needs to be right now.”

Well that was pretty blunt! I got the message. Even though the Point campus was only a half-hour away, I knew it was a world-away from the environment God was creating in my own home at the time. We had a very active family—along with school work, we had ballet, hockey, football, track, and a myriad of other activities with the kids. I thought about what the Lord had said—that He would teach me what I needed to know. And I chose to let my own dream die. I knew God wanted me to simply continue teaching art at CCA as I invested in our little family. I decided to trust that I'd heard from Him, and obey what I'd heard. (Whew!) I stayed where I was, and used what was already in my hand. I joined God wherever I saw Him working around me.

OUT OF THE ABUNDANCE OF THE HEART THE MOUTH SPEAKS

I began to ask the Lord what he wanted me to teach. “Out of the abundance of the mouth, the heart speaks” was the verse that I heard over and over in my mind. I wondered if I'd said some wrong things! Finally I asked the Lord what in the world that meant! In a flash, I knew that “just like verbal communication starts in the heart, art is visual communication and also starts in the heart.” I knew He wanted me to teach my students, “What's in Your Heart, Comes Out in Your Art!” Honestly, God actually

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re-taught me my major! Remember how disappointed I was with my college experience? It did not prepare me at all to teach the way I sensed God wanting me to teach. I began to clearly see God as the great Designer and Creator of the universe, and I began to really understand His elements and principles of design for the very first time! I was excited to pass it on.



One of our class quilts [Jeff—far right in the middle]

My young students created delightful artwork that danced down the halls of CCA, and I began to receive invitations to speak at Christian Educator's Conventions. We also were invited to display both my own and my students' artwork in several local banks, at the paper mill administrative building, and at McMillan Library. Their fresh, innocent designs along with short explanations referring to God's elements and principles of design were allowing us to share our Christian message and

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values, while promoting the school at the same time.



Contest winners - Kate, Top middle

Meanwhile back at home, our family looked forward to Taco Tuesday nights while I was teaching at CCA, and the kids kept me hopping with all their activities. I'd also been doing murals around town—at the mall, at the pregnancy center, at Evergreen, and at CCA.

LEAVING CCA

Then Pastor Parker [a sweet, older pastor] became the new principal. He became frustrated with me because I was working to improve the school as a whole. I had tried to warn him that accepting a \$10,000 donation stipulating that a high school be added was not a wise decision. I said that a high school would make the school top heavy and would probably bring the whole thing down. I encouraged him to build the school strong from

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the bottom up, offering a language and quality programs to set us apart. At the time I didn't realize it, but I was a big-picture, strategic thinker, and was just learning how to use those strengths. Most likely he experienced my thoughts as the "shadow-side" of those strengths. He told me that "the high school would be added and do just fine—that in ten years we would see which one of us was right." Unfortunately, the school failed, and I've always felt really bad about that. It had so much potential!

Pastor Parker wanted me to just teach art and not try to improve the school. He called me into the office and told me I could "keep working there if I would just quit having ideas!" I realized that he did not understand my gifts and strengths at all. Actually, I was just beginning to understand them myself! I also had to admit that I didn't have the best attitude about his leadership, and I asked his forgiveness—that was a huge step for me. But I knew God was releasing me from teaching at CCA, so I gave my notice, finished the year well, and left everything in good order. Eventually both Amber Siewert and Kristy Leach used my teaching style and art samples, passing on the concepts I'd been teaching.

REVIVING MY DREAM

I did however, continue to accept invitations to speak and facilitate workshops at Christian Teachers' conventions. I also

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put the elements and principles of design that God had taught me, along with some favorite projects for kids into a manual to help teachers and homeschooling parents.



Great Lakes Educators Convention, South Bend, Indiana 1993
One day, there was a man sitting in the back of one of my workshops. Afterwards, he came up and told me it was the most clearly communicated workshop he had ever seen! He happened to be the head of the Education Department at North Central University in Minneapolis, and he asked if I would consider teaching there!

I was shocked, and told him I didn't have a Master's degree. He said he didn't care—what he heard me talk about was exactly what they needed. Every K-12 teacher going through the Education Department at NCU was required to take Art Methods. He wanted them to have a strong foundation based on principles

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as opposed to just doing crafty projects. I also told him that I lived in Wisconsin, not Minnesota! Not at all daunted, he said we were creative people, and surely we could come up with a solution! He had no idea that my little dream was being resurrected!



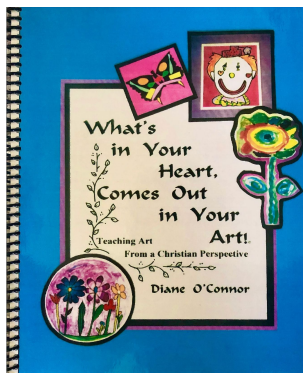
Some of my students at North Central

The following fall, I traveled to Minneapolis each month to teach for several days in a workshop format. Every student in the education department was required to take my class! There I was, re-designing the Art Methods Course and teaching at the university level—without a Master’s degree! My heart was full. God had, indeed, taught me what I needed to know. He had not forgotten the desire of my heart, and allowed me to have a taste of teaching at the college level in a Christian setting. I invested in students for several years, while I redesigned the program. Once the new foundation was laid, my designing turned to maintenance. I began to realize that I thrived as a “designer/starter-upper,” but began to wilt as a maintainer!

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Even though I hadn't realized it myself, God knew that teaching day-in and day-out at a university would have sucked the life out of me! Wow. If I had pushed through on my own to fulfill my dream by going to UW-Stevens Point, I would have spent a lot of money and been stuck in a career that wasn't a good fit for me!

Thankfully, God saved me from lots of schooling that would have taken me way off His track. I was able to admit to myself that I loved "starting, designing, and developing," and I absolutely rejoiced when I did not have to be the maintainer! I knew it was time for me to pass the teaching role at North Central on to a younger teacher who lived right there in the cities. We found a lovely young woman, and I trained her. Then I moved on to new adventures! I gifted my art manual files to North Central to keep and use as a resource, and they continued to print and offer it in their bookstore for years.



My First Book

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Shifting



Family life continued, and I so enjoyed my time as a mom! I just loved hearing about the kids' days, and encouraging them in their interests. It was so much fun.



Circa 1990

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Bob and I continued praying over each child and over the years we had kids in school at Rapids Christian School, Community Christian Academy, Assumption, East Junior High, Immanuel, and Lincoln! Activities at each of these schools kept us both on our knees — and on our toes! The kids were growing up and it was so much fun to watch each one find their way in life.

My time at both CCA and North Central University was complete. The kids were getting older, and I had more time during the day to volunteer. As was my usual custom, I looked for ways to volunteer wherever my children were. Kate was still in dance, and eventually in Lincoln's musicals. I used my design skills and continued to work with Lincoln students to paint large sets for their musicals.



A set for Guys and Dolls

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The boys kept us hopping with sports, and it was fun to cheer them on! Bob marked off his schedule so that he could leave early and could attend every game for each of them. What a great dad! Rob was into wrestling and football.



Football season

Once it became more affordable, hockey became a big part of our family life, too. Jeff and Tim were able to be on the ice all winter long, and we found ourselves making trips to the rink multiple times a week for games and practices, and working in the concession stand. One year, the boys gave me a cowbell so I could make a racket with the other hockey moms! I loved that!



Cheering at games, and wearing our buttons!

After my time at North Central was complete, I had a great conversation with our new youth pastor, Dan Frye. I loved his heart for teens, and I redirected my volunteer efforts to the Teen Center. I helped him develop the Student Ministries Department for junior and senior high, helped start a high school internship for teens going into ministry, played keys with the teen center worship band, worked behind the scenes to organize Winter Blitz retreats, and led a junior high small group. At the time, the girls in that little group seemed less than interested, and not very serious about our time together. But I kept showing up, and met

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with some of them outside our Wednesday nights. Years later, I ran into one of the girls who had seemed the least interested. She remarked, “Wasn’t our small group the BEST?!? I really loved that time!” It was just another reminder from the Lord that it’s our job to plant seeds, and He will be in charge of the results!

MOMS IN TOUCH

Around that time, I also joined the Mom’s in Touch Prayer group. I loved that it was one, dedicated hour of straight prayer. No stories or prayer requests—just prayers! I just dropped whatever I was doing and headed over to Sandee Boyles for that hour each week. The only rule was “come as you are, and join in prayer.” I loved that. When I got there I realized that these were women I really did not know, and were not women I would have normally gravitated toward. But as we prayed together, God moved my heart. These precious women became my prayer partners, not only for the schools, my family, and for the youth group, but also for any new ministry endeavor that God put on my heart over the years.

A few years earlier, I’d heard Pastor Steve and Pastor Dean talking in the hall and wished I could help behind the scenes to “help make church happen.” And now that longing was being fulfilled as I volunteered more and more time at CLF. I was invited to sit in on vision and planning sessions, and I loved it!

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I DESIGN

In 1997, Pastor Dean and Leata sent Julie & I to Willow Creek to take the Network Workshop on discovering your personal design. Interestingly, one of the first questions we were asked was, “What is your passion?” I was at a loss! It seemed like I was passionate about so many things; I didn’t even stop to think about the fact that my license plate said, “I DES1GN,” until the little group at our table began sharing. The experience at Willow Creek started to turn my thoughts toward discovering my purpose again.



With Julie

Julie and I were very different, and I didn’t know her well. But we came home from that first adventure and began working together to improve the workshop, creating CLF’s Discover Class using the acronym SHAPE - Spiritual Gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personal Style, and Experiences. At least a decade earlier, God

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had impressed on my that there were three categories of spiritual gifts—Motivational, Ministry, and Manifestation Gifts. Churches reacted strangely to Manifestation gifts, either ignoring them or going overboard and hyper-focusing on them! Julie and I decided to incorporate what I had learned as we developed our class. We understood that God called us to be “naturally supernatural,” and to use our gifts in our everyday lives. We put our main focus on teaching the Motivational and Ministry gifts, and just briefly explained what Manifestation gifts are. It was such a joy to help people grasp how God wired them!

As Julie and I began to understand each other's gifts and strengths, a deep appreciation grew. One day I woke up and realized we were friends! She is someone God chose to weave in and out of my life, and has always been an encourager for the big ideas God has put on my heart. Since the the 90's, we've spent many hours walking and praying, as well as hundreds of hours at the whiteboard, planning and refining. Without her partnership, there's no doubt I would not have been as successful in most of my later endeavors.

I definitely became a “full time volunteer” at CLF, serving on the vision team, and sitting in on staff meetings. Experiencing God by Blackaby was very influential in my life during this time. I began to look for areas where God was already working, and

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jumped in to join Him. And I continually passed on what I was learning to anyone who would listen.

LIFE PURPOSE: ENCOURAGE & STRENGTHEN

I also began tenaciously trying to clearly understand my purpose in life. I prayed, reflected, and determined, “My purpose is to use my passion for design to encourage and strengthen others.” I continued to help Pastor Dan, working with teens, leading a small group, planning retreats, organizing a talent show, and bringing in Reggie Dabbs to speak at area-wide public school assemblies. Computers were just starting to gain momentum. I was prompted to transfer my design skills to the computer so I could help communicate vision for ministries through graphic design. Bob has always been my number one supporter. He has always encouraged me in everything I do, and I’m so very thankful for that.



1995

Open Heart, Open Home



Even while ministry opportunities were opening up at CLF, my heart was still centered at home. Early in my life as a Christian, I'd read a book called *Open Heart, Open Home*. The author talked about the difference between “entertaining,” and “hospitality.” Entertaining was more about perfection and impressing people, while hospitality was all about focusing on your guests, making them comfortable, and inviting them into your life. I decided I wanted to have a home that was always welcoming, and I wanted to practice hospitality.

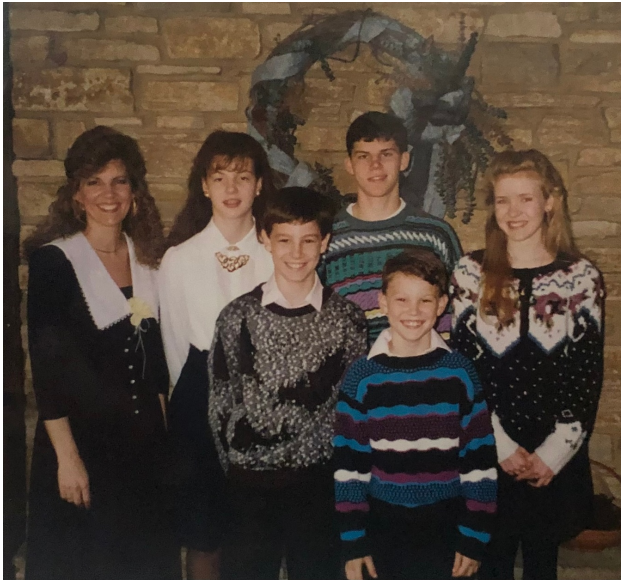
So along with creating a warm environment for our children, Bob and I also enjoyed opening our home to others and spending quality time with them—our parents' sibling's, nieces' and nephews' visits, the kids' friends hanging out or sleeping over, hosting Bible studies for women or couples, welcoming traveling speakers or ministry teams, hanging out with teenagers who stopped over to talk, grabbing snacks or pizza for small groups

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of junior-highers or college students, offering a respite for some—You name it! There were also a few who stayed with us for more extended times.

SUSA

In 1991, we unexpectedly took in Susa, an exchange student from Finland. It had been missions week at CLF, and I'd been talking to the Lord about how awesome it would be to take our whole family on a mission trip.



1991

I remember trimming the bushes in the fall, singing “Ask of me and I will send the nations as an inheritance for you.” I put down the clippers and headed over to pick up Kate from ballet. When I

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walked in the door her teacher said, “Hey, you wouldn’t want an exchange student would you?”

She explained that Susa was going through a tough time with her host family and the agency was going to move her to another town. Ballet was a huge part of her life, and she was devastated to leave. I met her and I heard God whisper, “I’m not going to send you to another country, but I’m sending a little piece of another country to you!” Wow. I went right over to the dental clinic and snagged Bob between patients, telling him what I’d been praying and what had just happened at Ballet. Immediately he said, “Of course we should take her!” No hesitation. His family had taken in his foster sister, so he was very open to it. God placed Susa in our home as an answer to my prayers that my children experience an another culture. We had many talks, and she was also part of our youth group. I lead her to the Lord at our kitchen table, and she became a strong Christian, going back to Finland as an ambassador for Christ! She is still a vibrant Christian today. She met her husband in Paris, and her positive influence is now felt in Canada where they currently reside. She serves as an elder at her church.

MICHELLE

Michelle was a neighbor and very close friend of Kate’s ever since they met when Rob was selling candy bars when they were little. As a junior-higher, she was struggling with her stepdad,

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and her mom was very distressed, feeling stuck in the middle.



Culvers in the family room

She ran away from home, and Kate said, “Mom, we have to do something!” She was right, and we worked it out for Michelle stay with us for awhile. But legally, she could only be in our home for a couple months without going into the foster system, which her parents did not want.

I told her mom that we would officially become foster parents just in case they needed us to help, even though there would be no guarantees the court would place her with us. So we went through the process to become official. One day her mom asked to take me out for coffee. She poured out her heart, saying she didn’t want another marriage to end in divorce, and she didn’t know what to do. The tension at home was unbearable, and all

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that came to mind was that when God closed a door, He always opened a window. She said, she thought I was her window. She was stressed to the max, and so was Michelle. She asked if we were serious about taking Michelle, and I said yes.

The social worker was surprised to see that we were prepared to take her, and that Michelle's parents were in agreement for her to stay with us, so they would place her with us. We all went to court, and her parents gave up their parental rights. Michelle officially became of ward of the state.



Sisters

That was incredibly hard for Michelle's mom, but it turned out to be a very good thing. The social worker was shocked when she picked up Michelle and drove her down the street to our house. Michelle walked right in, grabbed a banana, and sat on the divider between our kitchen and dining room, making herself right at home. The social worker told me she absolutely could not

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believe the difference—that Michelle was a completely different person when she walked through our doors!

Michelle settled right in, and it was fun having her officially be part of our family. She was a very easy charge—a great student, easy-going, responsible, and fun. I had to be intentional to remind myself that she did not need a mother—she already had a mom who dearly loved her. My role was to be an “adult friend” to help her navigate through this season. The goal was that she would be eventually reunited with her family.

Kate left to go off to Master’s Commission, but Michelle was here with Jeff and Tim for another year. While she was with us, her mom became frustrated, because she realized how much she was missing out on during her junior and senior years. She wrote me a note, accusing me of “stealing Michelle—of needing her in order to have purpose in my life!” I thought, “Wait a minute! You were the one who asked me to help!” I’ll be honest - that hurt! Trust me, I did NOT need another teenager to bring purpose to my life! But I surrendered it to the Lord, and reminded myself why I was doing it.

Michelle graduated, and because she was in the foster system, she was able to get a full ride to UW-Stevens Point! [Bob jokingly said, “OK kids, who wants to be a foster child? A full ride sounds great!” Michelle was a great student, majored in Education, and

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became a teacher. During her college years, she was reunited with her family, and now has a very good relationship with them. She also married a great guy, and together they raised a four beautiful kids. One time she thanked me again for our impact in her life. She told me that she experienced family life in two homes on Lovewood Drive, and she was modeling her little family after our family! That touched my heart.

The coolest thing happened just before her parents moved from Lovewood Drive. I had stopped to chat with her mom when taking a walk. I told her that I'd heard Kate preach a sermon that included some stories about Michelle and her family. Kate shared that oftentimes foster parents come across as "the heroes." But Kate said it was definitely a two-way street. While we welcomed Michelle into our family for a season, Michelle's family had welcomed Kate as a child, when the girls were back in forth on Lovewood Drive. They included Kate in their family times, and in overnights at her grandparent's cottage. Tears welled up in Sheila's eyes when she heard that. It really touched her heart. So I was privileged to see things go full circle. I'm very thankful God let me play a small part in the story He was orchestrating with that family.

MEETING THE BOYS — ROB, MANDO, JEFF

In the '90s I was leading a senior high Bible Study with one of the students in her home. She had a large basement, and we

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really filled it up each week! I was doing the Experiencing God study at the time, and each week I'd share what God was teaching me, and invited them to experience God, too. One day, three young men showed up: Mando, Rob, and Jeff. They look more "rough around the edges" than kids in our group, and after the study I heard their story. It turns out, each of them had been praying - saying, God if you are real, please get me out of Rockford and the gang scene. Someone's uncle had a small trailer "up north" in Wisconsin, and said if they wanted to come up, they could. Suddenly they were thrust into a cornfield in Wisconsin! After the streets of Rockford, it was quite a change! And somehow, God directed them to our Bible Study!

ROB & MANDO

Rob and Mando stayed with us for a short time, just until they had solid work and found an apartment. Rob had the gift of evangelism. He could walk up to someone sitting on a park bench, sit down, and have a conversation with them. Before he knew it, they were praying with him to receive Jesus! Mando was a very gifted artist. He was doing really great with his new-found relationships with the Lord, but ended up falling in love with a sweet girl. Unfortunately in a moment of weakness, she got pregnant. He married her because he did not want his child growing up without a dad. I went to their wedding and spent time with them, but his wife told me that the light in his eyes

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that attracted her to him was no longer there. It made me so sad. Eventually, I lost track of them. And later I heard that our evangelist, Rob, later died of a brain tumor.

JEFF

I loved having Jeff with us! When the invitation to move “up north” came, Jeff said he didn’t hesitate; he ran home, grabbed a bag with some of his stuff, and never looked back.



Jeff Deutsch

We took Jeff in during the summer. He was dreaming about going back to Rockford, only he wanted to go to Master’s Commission. He had no idea how in the world to make that happen. We prayed with him, and helped him figure it out. Jeff thrived at Master’s, and we invited him to come back the following summers so he could stay rent-free to earn money for a second and third year. I’ll never forget hearing him talking to Jesus one morning—“OK Jesus - It’s You and me. Today we’re

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gonna find us a job!” And he did! He was a member of the DelMonte Green Bean team two summers in a row.

Each summer, he came home with a bigger duffle bag that held everything he owned. The reason it got bigger, is that he kept collecting books! I loved his heart. Getting to know Jeff taught me to “never, ever, judge a book by its cover!” God most definitely had a wonderful plan for his life! Jeff went into the Army, and became a Chaplain’s assistant. He’s married now and they are doing great.

MATT

Matt was in our young adult group. He was living with his girlfriend, and realized it was wrong. He wanted to move but didn’t know how he could make it happen. We had him stay with us, and after many late-night talks we ended up helping him get into San Diego Master’s Commission. Later, he came back to Rapids, went to Mid State, and started his own tree service business. Matt’s story is still a work in progress.

KIDS AND FAMILIES

At some point, each of our kids [and sometimes their families] came back to stay for a bit during a life or job transition, and of course for holiday and summer visits. I ABSOLUTELY LOVED having them home with us for extended times! What a blessing to have the opportunity to interact with your adult children, back

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home where it all began!

In 2000, our own Rob came home on leave when everyone was getting engaged. He emphatically announced that he was definitely not ready to get married! Then he met Amie, and before we knew it, they were engaged too! Riley was just a little over a year when they met, and we invited Amie and little Riley to come stay with us for a few months so they could save rent money before the wedding. What a blessing it was to have my future daughter-in-law close, getting to know her. She was a such a great mom, and it was amazing to have a special season with her and my first grandchild-to-be!



Amie & Riley

In 2021, Kate's son Judah was ready for a change, and spent a summer with us while he caddied at Sand Valley. It's not often that you get to spend such a concentrated time with a grandchild, and it was really fun to have him with us. At the

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time, he was obsessed with his fixer-upper Corvette. At one point, he had it COMPLETELY apart, with pieces everywhere—and much to my surprise and relief, he actually put it back together. And it worked! The following year, he came back with friends, and rented a duplex from his Uncle Tim and Aunt Tara.

I have special memories of each child, spouse, and grandchild added to our family, and staying with us at some point over the years—for a night, or an extended period. Each time is a special blessing!



Judah, 2021

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Starting to Leave



The years raising kids was a flurry of activity that sped past so fast it made my head spin! I knew that good parenting was a delicate balancing act, providing both roots and wings, and I hoped I was doing both.



Circa 1993

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I tried to slow down and enjoy the moments. Sooner than I ever imagined it was time for them to start leaving the nest. I started to wonder if I did enough, said enough—were they ready? Would they do ok? One day I mentioned I was concerned about that to Bob's mom, and she assured me that everyone just does the best they can, and that's ok. It was good to hear the wise words from someone who also did her best. Since then, I've realized that God fills in all the blanks that imperfect parents leave. Each one of our kids is doing great in spite of us!



Front porch

When all our friends were insisting their kids attend college before doing anything else, God was clearly speaking to our children and leading them in a different direction. I realized this was actually what I had been praying for—I wanted my children

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to experience the Lord directing them, instead of completely relying on us by this stage of life. But when it actually starts to happen it's a little freaky! I needed to settle down and trust that God would direct them. It was my job to encourage them to follow God's leading. At times, it felt strange being the parent whose children were choosing alternatives to college. But we could see that each one was on their own journey, and I was excited for them. I would support them in any way I could.

ROB

In his senior year, Rob was into football, and loved hanging out with his group of friends. He was Homecoming King at Assumption, and he graduated in 1993. I thought I was prepared for him to graduate, but he shocked my system by going into the Air Force instead of going to college.



Rob's quarters at Nellis AFB in Las Vegas

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It really shouldn't have surprised me—after all, he'd had his “early military training” in the woods on Lovewood drive! But I'd planned on him being home for the summers, but when he went into the service, I realized he was gone—and likely not coming home for any length of time. Wow. That was sobering. I realized how precious the remaining years would be with the other kids, and prayed for God to help me make the most of them. Interestingly, while Rob was in the service, he called home a lot. We had really great conversations with him as he moved forward on his own life journey. Eventually he came back to attend UW-Milwaukee, and it was nice to have him in Milwaukee with my parents. But when he was getting close to graduating, he realized he wanted to re-enlist and try again to pursue his passion. He dreamed of being in Special Operations—a Combat Controller—and only had a small window to re-enlist. So off he went again!

KATE

In her junior year, Kate entered the Miss Wisconsin Rapids pageant with friends, “just for fun,” and surprised us all by winning! So during her senior year, I was kept busy with everything a pageant-mom needs to help with. I really enjoyed having her friends in and out, especially her “lunch bunch.”

After graduating in 1996, she was planning to attend North Central University in Minneapolis. During the summer, she went

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with the youth group on choir tour, and while she was away, God re-adjusted her plans. She was supposed leave for North Central the following month, but she nervously told us what God was speaking to her. Of course we helped her with all the changes, and off she went to Rockford Master's Commission, an intense nine-month discipleship program.



Miss Wisconsin Rapids, 1996

Kate loved Masters, and went back for a second year, growing in confidence, worship-leading, and leadership skills. She came back home for a semester, and interned for Pastor Dan with the teenagers at CLF. While at Spencer Lake with the teens, she met Jon Maurer, who was interning with his Michigan youth group. Later when Kate went to North Central, she reconnected with Jon, and helped him plant a church for young adults. During the

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time they spent together working on Bluer, they fell in love.

“THINK MULTIPLICATION!”

Jeff and Tim and Michelle were still at home but soon to leave, so I began praying about what I should be doing next. God whispered, “Think Multiplication!” I knew I was to focus on investing in leaders. Leaders would cause multiplication because each would, in turn, invest in others. It was during multiple visits to see Kate in Rockford that Pastor Jeanne Mayo majorly influenced me. I began reading everything I could find by John Maxwell, and listened to his tapes as I drove to Milwaukee on a regular basis to visit my parents who were really starting to age. God began sending a unique variety of emerging young leaders through my small group for me to practice on.

JEFF

The summer before Junior year, Jeff was kind of bummed cause most of his youth group friends were older and had graduated. I remember encouraging him to become the leader for those who were younger. He bought some baggy pants and a skateboard and began hanging out with Tim and his friends. During the summer between Junior and Senior year he went on an extended mission trip to El Savador. When he got back, he continued to be a leader in the youth group and at school. And each week he took our van, picking up junior-highers for a Bible study that he led in our family room. Senior year brought a fun football season,

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and he was also president of his class. He graduated in 1998, and was all set to go to Evangel, thinking he'd like to become a doctor. But when we went to Kate's Master's Commission graduation, he saw the guys praying together on stage afterward. He felt that God was calling him to experience that kind of closeness to Him, as well as to other guys who were whole-heartedly following the Lord. So, much like Kate, the Lord redirected him. As Kate left Rockford, Jeff started his first year there. He completed three years of training there, and also met the love of his life, Carey Schoengerdt.



PULSE Teen Center

TIM

Then it was Tim's turn. He was part of a band, and absolutely loved it! His plan after high school was to try to "make it" with

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the band, and I was praying and trusting God to direct his steps. The band cut a demo, and it was really fun to travel with them and watch them perform. Tim liked to play, but for him it was mostly about relationships. He loved the camaraderie being with friends in the band.



North Carolina

After a heartbreak caused by friends in the band just before his graduation in 2001, he realized he needed a new experience. Jeff mentioned a new Master's Commission program that was starting in San Diego. After a few conversations with the director, Tim decided it was what he wanted to do. So once again we had some last minute changes—and this time we had a child heading clear across the country to move toward the future God had for him! Tim loved Masters, and went back for a second year.

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He did some back-packing in Europe with a friend, and took photography classes. When he returned to Rapids, he worked every job imaginable, meeting more people than I thought possible! He also spent some time in North Carolina with Rob before coming back to Rapids and becoming a realtor. As he drove across the state line into Wisconsin, he was pumped and told us, “These are my people!” I love that.



Kate and Jon, 1998



Jeff and Carey, 2000

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Rockford, 2000

Turn of the Century

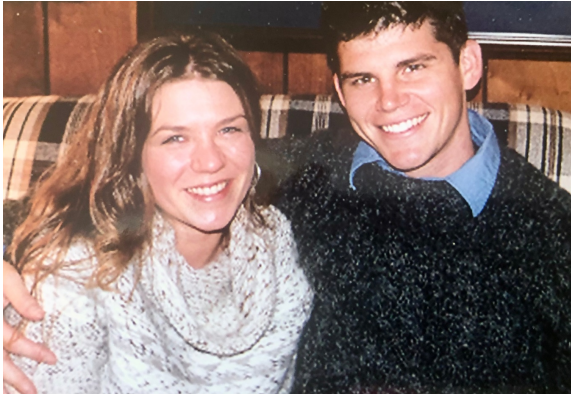


After some unsettling years with predictions of a catastrophe at the turn of the century, we all walked into 2000 without a hitch. But hey—at least we had a generator, and a wood stove in the basement, right? They both came in handy eventually. I turned fifty in January, and I was amazed to realize that I'd lived half a century!

This decade would bring more shifts in both our family and my ministry—in fact, change seemed to accelerate. Tim graduated and went to San Diego. Jeff & Carey got engaged—He stayed in Rockford to complete his ministry certification, while Carey moved to live in a church on the Navajo reservation in New Mexico, working with teens and young adults. She invited me to join her to teach the Discover class on the reservation, and it was a special time with both Carey and the people. In 2000, Kate & Jon also were engaged, and I listened as they shared their vision and watched them start BLUER, a young adult church radically

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different from anything I had ever seen. Rob was going through the demanding Combat Control Training. While home on leave, he met Amie Sailer and she captured his heart. It was so amazing to see our kids take off on new adventures! And it was even more exciting to see the wonderful life partners God was bringing into their lives! It was an answer to prayers that were whispered since they were quite young!



Rob & Amie

ACCESS

Back at CLF, I was still working with teenagers. I was so bummed to see so many “drop off a cliff” after high school. Bob and I began opening our home to young adults on Thursday nights. We had a slow start—sometimes just one or two would come. But we trusted that God had set up a special appointment with anyone who walked through the door, and soon we began to grow. During school breaks and summer we had a large increase in our

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numbers. The kids really wanted to be together, we did not want to lose momentum, so we just met as multiple small groups in different areas of our house! We called our young adult community “Access” because we have Access to the Father through the grace of Jesus on our behalf.



Access starting to grow

As we grew larger, I was asking God what we should do. One day as I was driving past our local shopping mall, I decided to stop in. I saw quite a few empty spaces and I got the courage to talk to the manager, asking if I might use some space in a vacant store one night a week. When told yes, I became even bolder and asked if I could create a great environment and leave it up. Much to my surprise, the answer was yes! The Church Board gave their approval, and I had so much fun creating a beautiful, welcoming

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space for our young adults. I have to admit that just like creating the environment for my art classroom, creating the environment for the young adults was one of my favorite things to do.



Access Center at the Mall

I also enjoyed putting my newly developing graphic design skills to good use. I was so glad I'd begun to learn computer skills so I could transfer my design ability to help reach the next generation!

So there we were in a rent-free space, connecting with young adults from our community each week! Kris Barteck linked arms to help us, and also planned some fabulous outdoor adventures for the young adults. At first we used a DVD and discussion series on leadership by John Maxwell, but then I asked Pastor Paul if he would teach a series for us one night a week. The kids loved it,

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and Paul continued to teach weekly on a wide variety of interesting topics. When that mall space was no longer available, we were able to move to Shopko Plaza mall to an even larger space, and we added a pool table, couches, and other games. Once again it was rent-free, but this time we were asked to pay for utilities, which CLF was happy to do.

2001 ushered in a tremendous season of change for our family. Jeff and Carey kicked it off with their August wedding in Kansas City.



August 11, 2001

I was so sad when we got word that Rob had gotten disorientated and dehydrated on a training exercise and would not make it to Jeff's wedding in August. I went to my hotel room and poured my heart out to the Lord. I was really looking forward to having the

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whole family together—after all, this was our very first sibling wedding! Then I distinctly remember God whispering, “I kept him alive!” When I heard that, I thanked God, dried my eyes, and determined to have a lovely time at the wedding—which I did!

We got home from Kansas City and I barely caught my breath — three weeks later on Labor Day weekend, Kate and Jon’s wedding happened in Wisconsin Rapids. It was beautiful, and being the mother of the bride was a different experience from being the mother of the groom!



September 1, 2001

I loved every minute of it, even when we realized that Kate forgot to sign a contract with the DJ! Thankfully her easy-going temperament, along with the ingenuity of her “make-it-happen” brothers and friends, saved the day! A few girls entertained at the piano while another group scurried off to set up a sound system. A few served as DJs, and the dance was no

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doubt better than if we'd hired someone! One of Jon's groomsmen was an amazing dance partner. His mom was a dance teacher, and he had me sailing around, looking like quite a professional! I think it was the most fun I'd ever had dancing with a partner other than Bob.

When September 11th happened, Bob and I watched TV in unbelief as the towers fell. Little did we know that world would never be quite the same. Kate was still out of the country on her honeymoon; Jeff and Carey were preparing to drive their U-Haul to New Mexico, Tim was ready to drive across the country in the Sunfire to Master's Commission in San Diego, and Rob was still training for Combat Control. It was a very unsettled time, for sure! I wanted to just hunker down and pull everyone close, but it was time for each them to move forward in the direction God was leading them. I reminded myself that each of them was "born for such a time as this."

Kate and Jon eventually made it back from their honeymoon, but my plans changed. I was supposed to drive to Minneapolis to enjoy a second wedding reception at their church, while Bob drove Tim to San Diego. Then I would to fly from Minneapolis to San Diego to see Tim's Master's Commission as he settled in. But flights were sporadic right after 9/11, so I hopped in the back of the little Sunfire and drove across the country with them. We stopped in New Mexico to help Jeff and Carey unload their

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U-Haul. When they were moved into their first apartment, we gave them a hug and it was on to San Diego! It always makes me feel better to actually see where the kids are living. It helps me feel more connected to their world. Once Tim was settled with his home-openers, Bob and I left the Sunfire with him and flew to North Carolina. There we attended Rob's graduation from Combat Control School under extremely high security. Whew! What a season! And it continued ...

Rob and Amie were engaged that Thanksgiving, and she and Riley came to stay with us until the wedding in May. What a special time!



May 18, 2002

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Well, we had three family weddings less than nine months! In those nine months we added three anniversaries and four birthdays to our calendar; our family of six became a family of eleven. [Actually, our foster daughter, Michelle, also got married in that time-frame! Thankfully, by then she was reunited with her family and they took care of all the details. It truly was the season of OC weddings!]

In 2002, our faith was stretched as we saw our children taking huge leaps of faith—Rob pursuing his military dream and marrying Amie, Jeff & Carey working together to start the discipleship program on the rez, Kate & Jon planting a church together in Minneapolis, and Tim in California, learning and growing through Master's Commission. At the end of May, I flew Riley down to Florida to be with Rob and Amie after their honeymoon. When I got home I was exhausted, and looking forward to a break.

But Pastor Dean invited Bob and I over. He asked if we might agree to co-direct a large stewardship campaign at CLF. He hoped the church would be able to pay off all debt and add a children's wing with a gymnasium. In spite of the crazy season we had just been through, how could we say no? We gathered a very large team, and I worked hard to help orchestrate a movement to raise 1.3 million dollars! I really learned a ton about creating buy-in and leading a large team during that season.

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After the campaign, Pastor Dean invited me to be on his staff, saying he'd really like someone on his team who "thought" like I did! Can you believe it? Someone actually appreciated my ideas and big-picture thinking! He said he'd call me his "Director of Ministry Development," and told me, "Just keep doing what you're doing!" It was so different from working under Pastor Parker at CCA who wanted me to "stop thinking!" I officially joined the CLF leadership team as the first "non-pastor." Julie and Leata were on staff, as well, so women's voices were being added to the table. One day, I found a prayer I'd written on one of our Rockford trips, kind of like a vision statement. I had envisioned being part of a ministry team where I was recognized as staff. We had varied gifts and worked together to make an impact on people's lives. I had even added little details like "having a mailbox, having office space."



My office at CLF

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After being a volunteer for so many years, it was unbelievably nice to be “official,” and to have space to work, meet, and pray with people! I continued overseeing Access, and also helped leaders build strong teams as they started new ministries.

When I was visiting Jeff and Carey in New Mexico, there was a speaker who talked about sexual abuse and shared her own story. I went home with a sense that I was supposed to do something about it in our community. I'd been praying with Mary Galliford each week at a little round table I had in my office, and one day I prayed, “Father I feel you want me to help women who have been abused and I don't know where to start. I don't even know anyone who has been abused. Please match me up with someone, Father. If you want me to help with this, please show me what to do.” There was just silence at first, but then Mary looked up and told me that she was the one I was praying for! She had been abused herself, and had been asking God how she might help other women. She didn't know where to start. We thanked God for connecting us, and we prayed for a partner for Mary. She told me she already had someone in mind, and she returned with DaNita Carlson. I worked with those two women, and sent them to an excellent training that I “just happened” to learn about, and a wonderful ministry called Restoring the Heart was started at CLF. Many women, and eventually their husbands, were ministered to through Restoring the Heart. Lives were changed.

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And Diane Macijewski, one of the women who was part of that ministry in the early days, has gone on to become a counselor and leader within the national training for that ministry!

Around the same time, some retired adults came to me with an idea to enlist others to help older adults. We gathered a strong team, and the Samaritan group was formed to help meet senior adult's physical needs. Pastor Dean also asked me to work with the Hispanic Ministry to help them build a strong team. And after seeing what an impact Master's Commission had on three of our children, I started thinking about the possibility of CLF starting a Master's Commission program.

BABIES!

Oh my! Here come the babies! As they arrived, I began jetting around the country to help. Madison in New Mexico [September 8, 2002], Judah in Atlanta [April 1, 2003], Kaleigh in North Carolina [July 13, 2003.] No words can express how awesome it was to hold each sweet little gem as they started their life in this world! I prayed Isaiah 59:21 over each one, just as I had prayed over their parents, "My Spirit, who is on you, will not depart from you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will always be on your lips, on the lips of your children and on the lips of their descendants—from this time on and forever," says the Lord."

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Madison Nizhoni



Judah Tarrant



Kaleigh Marie

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CRASH OF '04

In the winter of 2004 I experienced what I call “the Crash of ‘04.” I absolutely loved everything I was doing, but I was doing way too much. I should have slowed the ministry pace way down to make more room for all the family happenings, but I didn’t. So now I had to stop everything and withdraw to let my body and mind recalibrate! I took a leave of absence from CLF for a couple months and changed my pace of life. My body, soul, and spirit responded well to the changes I made, and I felt better than I had for years.

Meanwhile, CLF created a Department of Young Adult Ministry to take that off my plate. Pastor Paul was feeling the winds of change, and he stepped into the Director role. Eventually I was able to join back in to help him with Access, but I was way more careful with my pace of life in this new season.

MORE BABIES!



Carey & Maxwell Justus

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I resumed jetting around the country to help with more babies! And after I'd go to help initially, Bob and I would return together a few weeks later so he could meet each one, too. Max arrived in New Mexico [March 15, 2004], Creed in California [March 9, 2005] and Charlie in New Mexico [December 29, 2005]



Kate & Creed Andrew



Charlie Elizabeth & I

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Wow. Seven Grandchildren! And I had no idea we were only half-way there! Seven more sweet babies would be added, and seven more times I would have the joy of meeting each new little gem that God would place in our family!

We were now a family of sixteen. We had grown from six to sixteen in four years! I had so much fun with each of our little families, and felt so blessed that we could travel to be with each of them as their families began to grow. Each child was a special gift, and I loved seeing their little personalities begin to shine through.

CRU

In 2005, I had the opportunity to help a student start CRU [Campus Crusade for Christ] on our Mid State Technical College campus. One night a young woman named Jessie came into the Teen Center when I just happened to be there. She'd never been there before, and came to check it out even though she was a student at Mid State. As I struck up a conversation with her, she told me she really wanted to help do something at Mid State, but didn't know where to start. I could see that God was giving me an opportunity to invest in more young adults locally, so I offered to help. I thought CRU would dovetail beautifully with our young adult ministry at the Mall.

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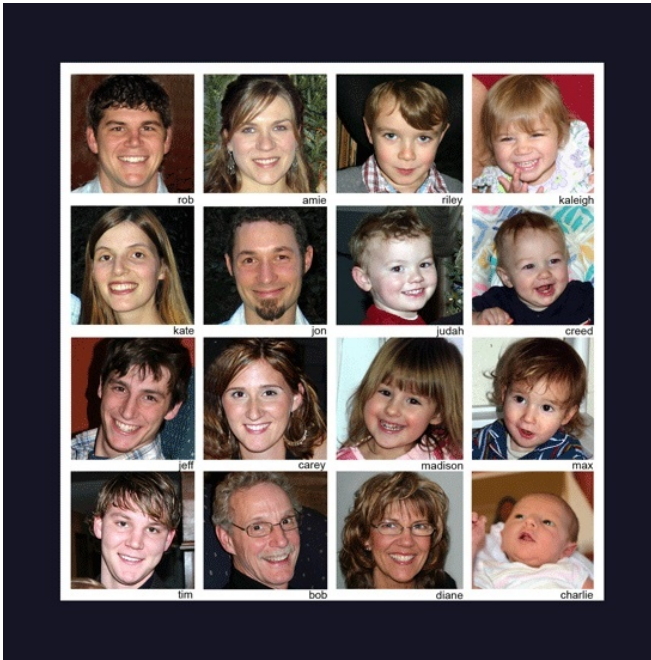


Richelle and I at Mid State, 2006

Jessie's aunt was Richelle Hoekstra-Anderson, a beautiful Christian who was a counselor at Mid State. She agreed to be the faculty advisor, and I partnered with them to launch CRU. It became an official club on campus. Richelle and I really hit it off, and we invested in young leaders through CRU every Monday for many, many years. In the process of ministering together, we became very close friends—we have had quite a journey together!

It's always amazed me how God brings people into our lives. He gives us "divine appointments." Sometimes we are there to encourage or help them, sometimes they are there to encourage or help us, and sometimes it becomes a two-way street.

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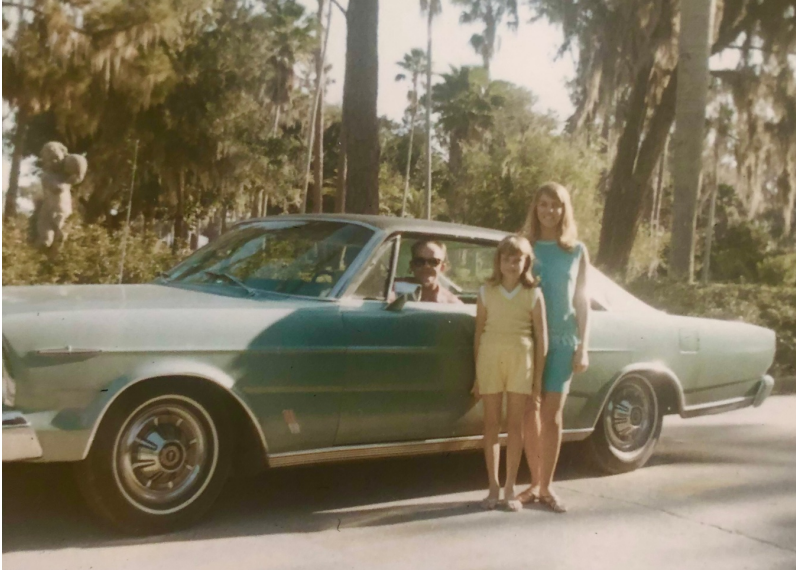


New Years Card, 2006

Driving, Flying, Cruising



When I was young, most of our out-of-town family trips were to Kenosha to visit my grandparents, or to Green Lake where we rented a cottage with my grandparents for a week in the summer.



Road Trip!

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Our only annual trip out of Wisconsin was driving to Florida to be with my grandparents during Christmas break. My fifteenth summer, we drove to New York to be with my dad's brothers, Pete and Harold and their families. My Uncle Harold was an artist, and knew I liked art. He wanted to take me to the ocean to paint with him one day. But I was intimidated, and opted to hang out with my teenage cousins instead. I really regret that decision. Who knows? Perhaps I would have discovered my love of painting the ocean more than fifty years earlier! But I finally got to know my cousins, and I loved that trip!

My first airplane flight was at age 22, on our honeymoon trip to Jamaica! It was a whole new experience for me, and I especially loved seeing the clouds. The turquoise blue of the ocean, and the super white sand in Jamaica really caught my attention and I loved it!

On the way to California in 1974, I enjoyed watching the landscape change, and marveled at the magnificence of the Grand Canyon. Once we were established in California, we enjoyed exploring the area, stopping at Solvang, a Danish town on our way to visit Patti Schulte and her family in Santa Barbara. We drove up the coast enjoying the ocean vistas, and stopped to buy a slab of redwood to make a coffee table, which is still in the family. We stayed with Bob's sister, Marilyn, in Mill Valley and explored San Francisco with Air Force friends. We skied at Sierra

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Ski Ranch and Mammoth Mountain, and drove through the redwood forests—the huge trees took my breath away! We also went south to visit friends from dental school—Mike and Sheila Connors—in San Diego, and even made a day trip across the border into Tijuana, Mexico. During this season, it was the snowcapped mountains and the glistening ocean that attracted me most, and I marveled at the variety of God's creation.

When our children were young, money was tight, and we stayed close to home with only regular trips to Milwaukee to see grandparents, and a few trips to Door County.



Door County in the 80's

When the kids were older, we branched out and drove to Kansas City to visit the Riesmeyer cousins. One year, Chicken Pox kept

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us from Bob's planned road trip out west, but a few years later we drove to Florida to visit Disney World. We also stayed at Cocoa Beach for a few days—that was definitely a winner!



Disney World, 1992



Give me ocean and sunshine any day!

One year, we drove out to Colorado for a family ski trip which was really fun. It was amazing to actually have warmish weather

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to ski in, compared to our frigid winters in Wisconsin.



Steamboat Springs, Colorado 1993

When Rob was stationed in Las Vegas, we flew the rest of the family to visit him. Since our trips were few and far between in those days, I really treasured each one.



Visiting Rob in Las Vegas 1994

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Of all the states aside from Wisconsin, we have the strongest ties to California. Even after we moved back to Wisconsin, we continued to travel there, as Tim attended Master's Commission in San Diego, and Kate and Jon spent many years in the Pasadena area. When they later returned to California, they settled in the San Dimas / Glendora area. We did a few side-trips with Marilyn to the wine country and Sausalito. Laguna Beach is where I was trained in Life Coaching, and Pasadena is where I was trained in StrengthsFinder. Besides Wisconsin, California is the state in which I've spent the most time. Of course, now Florida is becoming a rival!



Flowers, warmth, and smiles of Pasadena

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Wine Country with Marilyn

Most of our trips over the years were planned around seeing family, including Kansas City to visit with Carol and Fritz, Utah to visit Anne and Allen, and a trip to Boston to celebrate Mark Riesmeyer's wedding. After the wedding we traveled up the coast to Marblehead with Dick, Kath, Anne, and Allen.



Marblehead, MA, 2009—with Dick, Kathy, Anne, Allen

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Utah, 2010

Kate and Jon also lived in Atlanta and Baton Rouge, which gave us other areas to explore with them. Traveling to see the kids and grands as they arrived gave us opportunity to criss-cross the US by car and by plane!

Jeff and Carey were in Shiprock in the four corners area of New Mexico, serving on the Navajo reservation.



Shiprock, NM

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Rob and Amie were mostly in North Carolina, and once we drove with them to see Rob's quarters in Virginia Beach when he was on alert. I loved being able to see each of our kids in their new surroundings over the years! It was such a joy to get a little glimpse into their worlds! I enjoyed playing with babies and toddlers, and it was a really fun to help with projects and decorating in between snuggles and kisses.

In 2010, we flew to Washington DC to celebrate Rob's Combat Controller of Year award in a special ceremony. It was so much fun to explore DC with our sweet little family! We rode our bikes to explore monuments, and rode along the Potomac to George Washington's home in Mount Vernon.



Biking to Mt. Vernon, 2010

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Bob and I had a few escapes alone while the kids were very young—usually to dental conferences right in our region. Our first longer trip together was our 10-day Caribbean Cruise for our 25th Anniversary. That was amazing! After a day or two of resting up, I was re-energized and came alive as we explored St. Thomas, Martinique, Barbados, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Barts, Antigua, St. Maarten, and San Juan.



25th Anniversary Caribbean Cruise, 1997

We took several other cruises over the years, usually as an “add-on” after visiting Kate and Jon. When they were in Pasadena, we cruised to cities in Mexico on the Pacific side, and when they moved to Baton Rouge, we cruised to cities in Mexico on the Atlantic.

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Love that Jamaican ocean view!

After the kids were all gone, we routinely took a winter trip, often to all-inclusive resorts, spending time in several cities in Mexico, and Punta Cana, and one in Jamaica. We also went to Hawaii, staying on the main island, Kawai, and Maui.



On Maui, 2007

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We really looked forward to our warm, sunny get-aways from Wisconsin winter, and each place we visited was wonderful! We always opted for someplace with a beach instead of touring far-away places. Sometimes I wonder if we should have explored Europe before the world started getting so crazy! But I'm content and grateful. We love the ocean, and I have great memories of each time away with Bob, especially sitting next to him in a lounge chair or walking along the beach. I always loved sharing time in the warmth of the sun, with the beauty of the turquoise ocean and white sand, as well as the brilliant green with gorgeous, colorful flowers! It was a delight for the eye, and it fed my soul. I'm so thankful for our time together, whether at home or away!



Puerta Vallarta—Bob & Scott

Scott invited us to one of his homes in Puerta Vallarta for our anniversary in 2008, and it was spectacular! Each bedroom suite

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had a “window-wall” that completely opened up to a patio. And there was a care-taker, and even a cook!



In the infinity pool—the Puerta Vallarta home Scott also offered the hospitality of his Phoenix home, and of course we were blessed to stay often at the famous Wessel-Papin Door County home in Egg Harbor.



Door County with the girls, 2004

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Door County has always been a place that I've been able to relax and unwind. It's so nice to have such a lovely place so close! I can just smell Door County Coffee and Tea, and see the waves crashing in Bailey's Harbor. Visits to On Deck in Fish Creek, Door County Natureworks, Door County galleries, and an occasional lighthouse are a must.



Summer, 2004



One of many annual girl's trips to Door County—Spring, 2007

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For a good number of years, I was able to use Scott's home and invite my friends to join me. We explored the bay, Lake Michigan, galleries, and restaurants. I must admit, though, that the highlight of our trips were shopping and chatting! It's so good to have comfortable friends who know you well!



The famous curvy road near Northport

I still look forward to time in Door County with Bob several times a year. Sometimes we go alone, and sometimes with friends or family.

Most recently we rediscovered Florida, staying within the US to enjoy the beauty of the sand and ocean in Vero Beach. We explored both sides and decided we liked Vero beach. It's not as crowded as the other side, and I love the majesty of the magnificent waves on the Atlantic side. Knowing Kath and Dick

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are there is a bonus, too. I definitely come alive in warmth, surrounded by gorgeous color in nature!



First Oil Painting of Vero Beach, 2022

Exponential Growth



In 2005, I met Dale Arendt, a pastor-turned-executive-coach. I was curious about coaching, so I asked him to coach me for a few months at CLF. I settled on some priorities for both work and family, and became more intentional, focused, and confident in what God was calling me to do. I had done the StrengthsFinder Assessment earlier and my top five strengths were Maximizer, Strategic, Connector, Activator, and Ideation. It had been interesting to me, but I really didn't know how to make the assessment work for me. Dale had me dig them out again and used the whiteboard to coach me through both the positive impact and shadow sides of my strengths. It was quite eye-opening. I realized that my strongest strengths could really get me into trouble if I was over-using or using them inappropriately. For example, Maximizer causes me to want to take something good and turn it into something great. As an artist, I could keep tweaking a painting and tweaking a painting until it became a whole new scene! I determined to be mindful of

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when it was time to call it “good enough,” and just start a new painting. Activator caused me to jump on board and take advantage of opportunities that a procrastinator might miss. But it also cause me to jump into ideas too quickly, speak too quickly, and volunteer too soon without thinking things through. I realized that the strength of Activator was causing me problems and I determined to recognize when Activator was a play, and be intentional to use it only in a positive way.

CLF STAFF

By this time, I knew I was a “starter.’ I was thankful to be on a staff that was unified, and where relationships came first. It was awesome to work under Pastor Dean, who was secure enough in ‘who God made him to be’ so he could surrounded himself with a constellation of seven strong leaders with a wide variety of gifts.



Staff retreat at Scott's in Door County

Now the staff consisted of Pastor Dean, Leata, Pastor Julie, Pastor Steve, Pastor Dan, Pastor Ben, Pastor Paul, and me. I

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know I mentioned that when he hired me he said, “Diane, whatever it is that you do – just keep doing it!” And so I did. He and Leata continued to be an encouragement to me.

OUT OF THE CHURCH & INTO THE COMMUNITY

I participated in the Community Leadership Program through the Chamber of Commerce, representing CLF each month for nine months. Then I served on the Advisory Board and initiated the tradition of doing StrengthsFinder with each class. I facilitated the final session with Pastor Paul, tying it all together, for quite a few years. Several times, I also helped facilitate the first retreat session. I was also working with CRU at Mid State around that time, and I stumbled on a little leadership book by Tim Elmore called *Leaders Everywhere*. It was an influential little book to add to my leadership library. I talked most of the staff into joining me for a “leadership lunch” to talk about what it might look like to invest in leaders at CLF.

PATHWAY TO PURPOSE

In May of 2006, I stumbled upon Katie Brazelton’s book, *Pathway to Purpose*. My heart beat faster at finding some tools that might assist me in helping others better understand their purpose in less than the thirty years it took me to find mine! Much to my surprise, it confirmed everything I’d been learning, and I was amazed to see that Katie scheduled training to become a Life Purpose Coaches & Facilitator. Here was a chance for

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further training along the lines of things I'd already been interested in and doing. Since it was offered in Laguna Beach, I felt comfortable traveling there and combining it with a visit to Kate's. I signed up, and it was the first time I traveled by myself for personal growth. It was absolutely amazing to be in a room full of women who shared my passion!



Coach Certification in Laguna Beach, 2006

And the fact that we were staying right on Laguna Beach was unbelievable! I think it was during that week that I realized how God wired me to be attracted to and energized by the ocean's crashing waves. I had enjoyed the mountains of northern California —so majestic and breath-taking, but in my heart I was always more drawn to water. It both energized and calmed me at the same time! I also realized that it was the river and all the lakes back home that captured my attention, drawing me in and calming my soul. I have to admit, though, the ocean is my

favorite!

ROCKBRIDGE

While doing the coach training, one of my instructors told me about Rockbridge Seminary, a college that was completely online. It was based on the concepts of the Purpose Driven Church, and divided studies into Worship, Fellowship, Discipleship, Ministry, and Evangelism. I was so excited at the idea of it. But I knew in my heart that the Lord had said no about going for my Master's degree in the past, so I tried to dismiss the thought of pursuing it. One day when I was quiet before the Lord I heard him whisper, "I didn't say NEVER to a Master's Degree back then; I said NOT NOW." I knew the timing was right and the school itself was a really good fit for me. God was releasing me to pursue my dream of earning my Master's degree— I would earn an MML [Master's in Ministry Leadership], and I was so excited!

While taking my Rockbridge classes I was able to put things into practice immediately in my role at CLF. I had asked [Pastor] Julie Overfurf to serve as my on-site advisor for my time at Rockbridge. She was the perfect person to ask, because she was really interested, and asked a lot of great questions about what I was doing. We learned together. And the Coach Training I was doing complemented each course I took through Rockbridge. I met amazing people from all over our country and the world. Both Life Purpose Training and Rockbridge catapulted me way

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beyond my little home in central Wisconsin, and allowed me to interact with interesting people all over the world.

Coaching was a new concept at the time, and I felt that being certified would give me credibility. I also knew in my heart that coaching was actually discipleship, and I loved the idea of helping women live and lead from the inside-out. I came home from training and tested the waters at CLF. I offered a book study for women using Katie's book, *Pathway to Purpose*. I expected small group study, but to my surprise, over 80 women signed up! I had them sit at tables of eight so there could be group discussion. During that time I was also the keynote speaker at CLF's women's event called, "Inside-Out." After I was certified as a Life Purpose Coach, Katie Brazelton invited me to train to be one of her instructors, which I did. I was then connected with high level leaders —women from all over the country and the world.



Helping Katie with Training in Laguna

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I absolutely loved investing in them! I also found StrengthsFinder Training close to Kate's family in Pasadena. It was reasonably priced because it was designed for non-profits instead of businesses. Since I could stay at Kate's, I attended it and was certified. I really put that strengths training to good use over the years, encouraging everyone I came in contact with to take it!

JULIE

I went to another workshop at Willow Creek during that time, and participated in the leadership track. I remember it was the first time I heard the term "Organizational Development," and my heart quickened, realizing it described exactly what I had been doing. I never knew there was actually a name for what I instinctively enjoyed doing! And now that I had a word for it, I could learn more about it, gaining skills to be better at it. Again, it dovetailed beautifully with my coaching and Master's Program. I took a group of women leaders from CLF with me when I went, and Julie was one of them. I asked her if God had spoken anything interesting to her and she said, "Yes—would you really like to know? He told me, 'Hang with Diane.' Whatever you do, I'm supposed to hang with you and help you do it!" Wow, that was interesting! Julie and I had grown closer as we worked on the Discover class, and as we processed what I was learning through Rockbridge. She was also quite interested in coaching,

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and seeds were being planted for adventures God would take us on in the future.

MOVING BACK

This was all taking place while we had shifts in the family, with babies arriving regularly! I loved flying around the country to hang out and help with both the oldies and newbies. Then, in 2007, Pastor Dean invited Jeff and Carey to serve on his staff, discipling teens at CLF. They accepted, and moved to Wisconsin with Madison, Max, and Charlie!



Moving to town!

Then Tim moved home, too, after some time in North Carolina. He was excited to be coming back, and we were pumped to have him here. The boys were coming home! Honestly, when they were in junior high, I'd realized that most kids moved away and never came back. I had prepared myself for that. It was a wonderful change to have the kids and grands close by, and I counted it quite a blessing! Having family in town was new to us

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after so many years of traveling to be close to anyone. At first when I bumped into Jeff in the office at CLF, or looked across at him in staff meetings, it startled me back into the reality that they were really here! It took awhile to adjust, but we settled into a routine, and Bob & I spent time with the littles regularly. What a blessing to have family close by!

BROKEN FOOT

Jeff, Carey, Maddy, Max & Charlie had stayed with us while they looked for a home in Port Edwards. One summer day, I stood on our boat in the garage to reach the umbrellas for shade on the back patio. I was barefoot, and as I slid down from the boat with the umbrellas, my right foot turned landed on some golf clubs that had fallen over. I felt the pain in my gut when I landed, so I knew it wasn't good. A tiny piece of bone had broken off that was attached to the ligament that went up the side of my leg. After the first surgery, I came home with three screws and a plate in my poor little foot! Long story short, it was a botched job that never healed, and after six weeks I still could not walk. I felt bad for the young doctor who did it, and wanted to give her another try. But Bob said, "Absolutely not! This is not the time to worry about someone's self-esteem!" Instead we went to Dr. Wilkes who looked at the X-rays and told me, "I think I can fix it so that you can walk again!" What?!? Wow. I hadn't realized how serious it was until he said that. Thankfully he removed the plate

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and screw, and instead used the holes the previous doctor had made to tie my tendon to the bone. I was given strict instructions—absolutely no weight-bearing! That made it a total of three months of maneuvering through life without bearing weight on my right foot. Instead of being annoyed at the the slower pace of life, I decided to embrace it. God taught me so much during that time! He kept me still in one spot. I was still able to coach by phone, and complete my Rockbridge courses online. And I had some great visits with family and friends.

HAWAII

By fall, even though I was still on crutches, we went to Hawaii for Life Purpose Coach training and a beautiful getaway. Hawaii was amazing, and I was really drawn to the gorgeous turquoise water! This was definitely one of the most beautiful places we ever visited. Give me a beach any time! The gorgeous, changing hues of the ocean, the rhythm of waves crashing to shore, the smell of salt water, the fine white sand, and the spectacular sunrises and sunsets over water always feed my soul.



Cindy, Dalene, & Betsy

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In Hawaii, I reconnected with some coaches I'd met in earlier trainings. Betsy Ringer, Darlene Lund, and Cindy Tannehill and I decided to start a monthly cohort call. We've become wonderful friends, and since 2007 we've had a conference call or Zoom every month! One of us leads with a devotional, and then we hear from everyone as we answer coaching questions about life, and ministry, or business. It's a strong bond, and I love the connection.

HAVEN

Sweet little Haven was born November 3, 2008, so we had another great chance to connect with Kate and Jon.



Haven Chloe

They were living and working on campus at Azusa while Jon completed his Master's at Fuller, and they planted an another church. It was an inspiring time and we cheered them on as they launched the church in a club in Pasadena.

BACK TO LAGUNA

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I had been coaching and training lots of women from around the world by phone and internet. One of them was Grace Sabarus from Indonesia. She was a beautiful Christian living in a Muslim country—a talented leader that God was using mightily.



With Grace in Laguna

We both traveled to Laguna beach where I met her in person, and facilitated her two-day life plan. After the Life Plan with Grace, I helped Katie Brazelton teach and mentor the new group of coach trainees. It was an experience of a lifetime, and I really connected with that group of women. It was amazing to see what God was doing with women all over the world! Years later, Grace started a design company in Bali, and hired many local women. She is coaching them daily.

COLIN

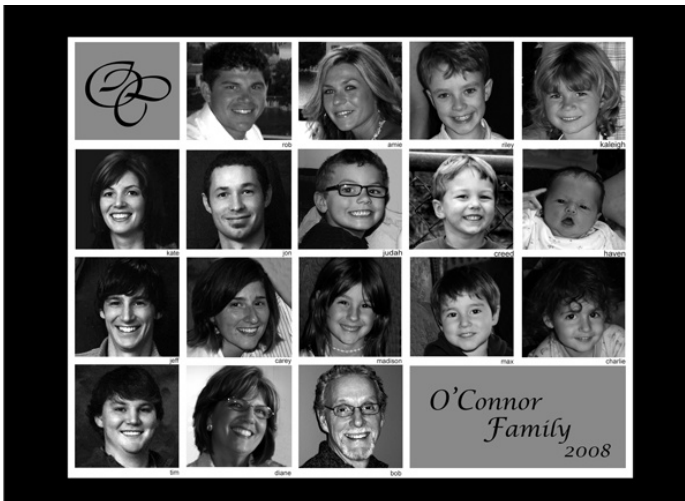
On December 22, 2009, baby Colin was born, number four for Jeff and Carey, and the ninth in a delightful group of grands!

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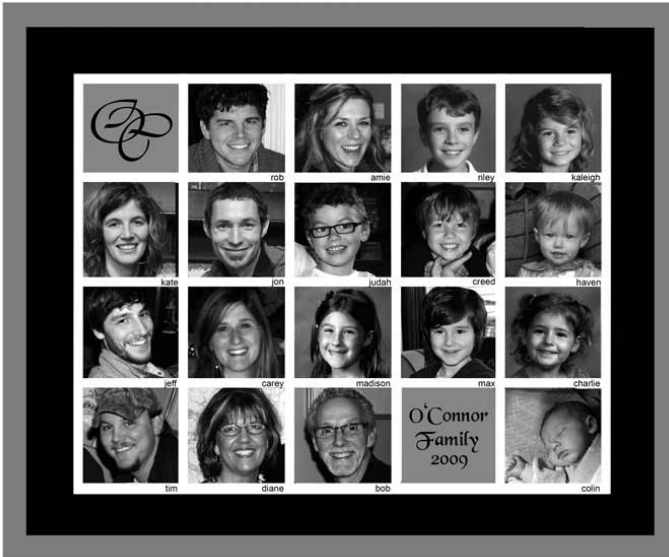


Colin Andrew

As much as I enjoyed coaching leaders and participating in community leadership initiatives, I'd have to say that I take more delight in our family than anything. At its core, leadership is influence, and I pray that my influence strongly impacts our children and grands. In the everyday interactions of life, may they know You more deeply, Lord!



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Who I Am is What I Do!



C

ONVERGENCE!

During this learning and growing season of my life I really felt alive! I loved coaching women from all over the world—and it was fun to turn around and invest in women here, too. Locally, I was also helping leaders build strong teams and organize their ministries. Through one of my classes at Rockbridge I realized that I was in a stage of life where I was experiencing “Convergence” — where all my gifts, strengths, and life experiences were starting to converge; I was at a place in life where “‘Who I am’ is ‘What I do!’” I was whole-heartedly pursuing things I was passionate about, and able to coach others to become all God designed them to be. I completed 1:1 two-day life plans with over twenty local women in leadership, and I loved doing it. But it was very time consuming, and I found myself wondering if there might be a way to do something similar with more than one woman at a time. How might I invest in women leaders in our community?

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ADVANCED LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

I'd been invited to participate in ALI—Advanced Leadership Institute [KI Thoughtbridge] with other leaders in our community. We were encouraged to find an area of leadership in the community that interested us and pursue it. I realized that people were collaborating like crazy in our community, but the church seemed to be missing! I decided to see if women from other denominations would be interested in coming together to grow in leadership. I thought of calling it WiLD—Women in Leadership Development. We would be “wild women”—a different kind of wild! Women who lived from the inside-out.

STARTING A WILDFIRE



Very first meeting at the Mead

We had a meeting at the Mead in January of 2010, with a room full of women from multiple churches and denominations. I'd learned a lot about including people and creating buy-in from our work with the CLF stewardship campaign, so I cast vision

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and spoke to the women about working together to impact women in our community. They left inspired.

That meeting brought together a team of women from a wide variety of churches in our area. Out of that meeting I gathered a great team who worked with me to host the Beth Moore simulcast in April. We ran into a huge snag with the internet, but Julie and I walked around and around CLF, praying for the event and asking God for wisdom and favor.



My Beth Moore Make It Happen Team

At the last minute, thanks to Pastor Dean, the church switched providers—just in the nick of time—and the simulcast happened without a hitch. Whew! Things like that built my faith and confidence to keep moving forward with other new endeavors. Five-hundred women joined us for Beth Moore—word had spread like WiLdfire!

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First “Called to be WiLD” event at the Mead

From that event we had a pool of women who were interested in leadership development. Julie and I orchestrated a series of half-day “Called to Be Wild” events at Hotel Mead. They combined short times of inspiration with time for conversation, and answering questions around the table.



Lunch Connection



Challenging them to take a “next step”

The WiLDFire events were a huge success, and even now, all these years later, when I meet new women around town they often tell me they remember attending those special events back in day, and what an impact they had on their lives.



Another “Called to be WiLD” event at the Mead

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Around the same time I worked at enticing our CLF staff to join me for lunch to talk about raising up leaders. We were doing annual leadership events, but I really felt like we needed to include a more intentional coach-approach along with events.

Pastor Dean asked me, “If you had to choose a few basic things people should know about leadership, what would they be?”

I know he was thinking about a simple class, but I’d been learning so much. And everything I was learning was all jumbled together “in my cooker.” I searched for ways to synthesize and maximize all I was learning about both coaching and leadership—Coach training, John Maxwell, Rockbridge Seminary, Lead Like Jesus training, StrengthsFinder, Heart of Wisconsin Leadership class, Advanced leadership Institute...

It certainly WAS all jumbled up in my cooker! How could I simplify things? What structure could I use to hold it together? I prayed for wisdom to bring order to it—for God to help me design something that could be passed on to others.



Walking and praying with Julie

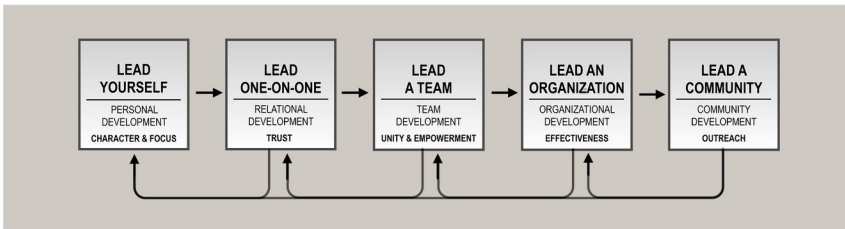
Leader to Leader



As I prayed about what could be offered to raise up leaders at CLF, everything I'd learned about leadership was swimming around my brain. How could I organize and simplify it to pass it on? I asked God for wisdom. What would a new leader need to know? Where should I start? Then I started coaching myself, asking “Who should I be leading?” and “What should I do to lead effectively?”

When I asked myself, “Who should I be leading?” I was kind of surprised that the first thing that came to mind was that I should be leading myself! Most leaders think immediately of the other people they should lead, but God was telling me to lead myself first. Next I wanted to influence others through relationships. From there I could process to leading a team, an organization, and beyond. So I chose five domains represented by five squares - Personal Leadership, Relational Leadership, Team Leadership, Organizational Leadership, and Community Leadership.

LEADER TO LEADER™ FRAMEWORK



Next I asked, “What should I do to lead EFFECTIVELY in each domain?” I was surprised at how asking that question began to clarify things for me. Immediately everything I’d been learning began to fit nicely in each of the domains.

My little diagram became a framework that helps to illustrate my philosophy of servant leadership. It has become a foundational structure on which to build as I coached people to grow in servant-leadership. I was amazed when I realized that every principle of leadership that I’d ever learned fit somewhere on this Framework!

Here it is in a nutshell:

LEAD YOURSELF

The Framework illustrates that the first person we are called to lead is ourselves. Leaders develop character and focus as they clarify their personal design and calling, stay true to their personal values, and learn to live intentionally. Servant-leaders live and lead from the inside-out.

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LEAD ONE-ON-ONE

Next, leaders are called to influence others relationally (one-on-one). Effective leaders are good communicators who know the importance of building trust and handling conflict well in order to establish healthy relationships. And of course, leaders always return to leading themselves first.

LEAD A TEAM

Next, leaders work with a group of people, helping them to grow into a healthy team. A leader's first team is often their family. To be effective, a leader must model the way, inspire a shared vision, equip and empower others, innovate and evaluate systems, celebrate wins, and encourage hearts.

LEAD AN ORGANIZATION

Leaders may eventually become "leaders of leaders" in an organization, business, church, community, or beyond; the principles of servant-leadership remain the same, and no matter how far they progress in leadership, a wise leader continues to live and lead from the inside-out.

LEAD A COMMUNITY

Servant-leaders will reach a point where they desire to reach out beyond themselves, their teams, and even their organizations. They can use their influence to have a positive impact on the community in which they serve. And, as always, a wise leader

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continues to personally live and lead from the inside-out.

So now I had a framework that allowed me to organize all the principles of leadership that I felt were important. And I had an idea about the format I'd like to use—similar to the format they used with us in the Advanced Community Leadership Institute, only with more of a coach-approach. Coaching in a group format seemed kind of overwhelming to me. I called Julie to see if we could meet so I could share my thoughts. I knew that God had told her she should hang with me—which she certainly had! We taught workshops together, walked around the church and prayed together, and orchestrated large events for women. But what would she think about this?



God matched me with Julie for quite a few adventures! When I met with Julie, I showed her my little sketch of the framework God had brought to mind. I told her I felt that I'd like to try organizing a “group coaching” format to pass on the principles that God had been teaching us. I told her that I felt

very comfortable coaching women 1:1, but I'd never done it with a group. What did she think? Would that be a good thing to do? Julie responded with an emphatic yes! She said it was really needed in the church, and I should definitely do it. If I would do it, she would definitely help. That's all I needed to hear. I knew that Julie had the gifts and strengths for orchestrating groups, and I really believed God put us together so we could design something that would help many more women than I could ever impact on my own.

After many whiteboard sessions, wrestling with a gazillion possibilities and ideas, we settled on the most basic, essential leadership concepts. We would create a group coaching experience to lay a strong foundation in servant-leadership. Using the framework, leaders could continue to grow and build on that foundation, literally for the rest of their lives! We believed that leaders are smart, and given the right environment and some powerful coaching questions, they would sharpen each other. We would do this first session as a pilot, adjusting as we went along. We would have them sit in small groups of six to eight, and stay with the same group throughout our eight months together.

Instead of long teaching sessions, we would share short bursts of information from the front, and then allow plenty of time for them to interact guided by powerful coaching questions. They

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would wrestle with the concepts around their tables, and choose action steps each month to move them toward their goals. We decided to start our sessions in October of 2011. We started with women we recruited through WiLDFire events.



One table at our first Group Coaching Session

While we were working on it, God really directed my steps. For example, during the spring/summer before we started, I was traveling to Milwaukee a lot as my mom's health was declining. In the summer, my sister and I took turns staying with our parents 24/7 so that we could care for mom in her final months, weeks, days. We were both there when mom died on September 29th. [Ironically, I had just left the room to make my dad a sandwich when my mom died. I felt so bad that we were not with her at the specific moment of her passing as we had been when Bob's mom died. I always picture a loving family surrounding their loved one as they take their last breath, but that was not to be. Later though, I chuckled and took comfort in the fact that

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mom would have LOVED that I was making dad a sandwich—that's what she would have done!]

Anyway, after mom's funeral, I returned home and continued working with Julie to design our coaching experience for leaders. In October of 2011, we started our pilot group coaching session with a room full of women, seated at tables of six to eight. We were to meet monthly over eight months, and progress through the first three squares in the leadership diagram—we'd lay the foundation for personal, relational, and team leadership. We had a basic outline of the eight months, but since it was a pilot, our plan was to add to it each month as we progressed. In October, I was putting the finishing touches on my part of the November session, on the topic of "Clarify Your Personal Values." I was using the quote, "Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom." [Psalm 90:12]

I had to pause my planning because my sister and I were meeting to sort through mom's things. I hopped in my car and headed back down to Milwaukee. While sifting and sorting that day, I opened a closet, and there on the shelf was a large stack of calendars. I realized that stack represented thirty to forty years of my mom's life! I sat down and flipped through the pages, glancing at all the notes she had jotted down ... thousands of everyday choices that had shaped her life! And each small square represented one full day. I pulled out my phone and calculated

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that she had lived through 32,447 squares in her 87 years!

That experience impacted me deeply! I thought about years being broken down into seasons, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes and moments—moments that seemed insignificant. But in the end, my life would be the sum total of many, many moments. I mean, here I was, getting ready to inspire others to be intentional about their life and leadership, and I was being challenged to be even more intentional with my own life! I really wanted to leave a strong legacy, starting with my family. There were 20 of us at that point! Bob and I had certainly multiplied. We had four married kids, nine grandkids, and my dad! I realized that my legacy would also someday extend to the leaders I would invest in, too. I really wanted to encourage and strengthen each person God placed in my life, passing on all that I was learning.

I saved the stack of calendars, and every time I teach on values I share that story. In January of 2019 I said, “Well, as of today, if I’m blessed to live as long as my mom - and of course there are no guarantees—but if I do—I’d have 6,540 squares left. Yikes! Kind of sobering when you think of it that way, isn’t it? Suddenly 6,540 doesn’t seem like such a large number, does it?! When I first realized it, I kind of panicked and felt like my days were ‘slipping away.’ [At this writing I’d have 2,534 left—YIKES!]

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“Thankfully I no longer see it that way. God had me reframe my thinking—instead, when I wake up I think—I’m still here! I’m choosing to visualize each new day as an “add on” that God has blessed me with, rather than a day slipping away and being subtracted from my life. Each new day I’m given fills me up with new experiences and great memories.” Then I tell them, “You know, I’m realizing that other people will be happy to ‘fill in our squares for us’ if we are not careful! It’s so important to make wise choices; to be intentional about where we want to invest our time. Taking time to sort out your personal values is a great place to start. Once we clarify what’s really most important to us, we can more easily say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to opportunities that would fill in our calendars.”



Team Strengths Session

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In every season of life, God teaches me things, and every new environment is a place to see Him in a fresh way. For example, my group coaching commitments had to be woven into my life along with all my family commitments. During our “baby season” I was flying all over the country. It was always nice, refreshing change for me to leave my ministry behind and settle back with a journal, asking the Lord what He wanted to teach me while I was all strapped in on the plane. I was definitely a captive audience.

One time, I was flying home from Kate’s after a great visit. When flying, the Lord often gives me great ideas when I’m confined and He has my undivided attention. That day I was thinking about Leader to Leader and all the wonderful gems the Lord was giving me. I starting to rack my brain for ways to get the word out about it to more people. What in the world could I do to push it out there where people in leadership would hear about it? I started writing down all kinds of ideas but then I heard a whisper,

“Sit still and I will move you forward.”

In a flash I reacted, chuckling to myself and thinking, yeah, right - how in the world could I move forward if I was sitting still?

In another flash it hit me. At that very moment I was sitting still. Yet in that plane I was moving forward faster than I could ever

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go by myself! Here I was seat-belted in. Completely still. Yet I was moving forward at over 500 miles an hour through absolutely no power of my own! Wow. Quite a real-time illustration! I realized that God was telling me that I should sit still in HIM, just like I was sitting still in the plane. So I kept that in mind, and settled down. And amazingly, God most certainly did move me forward as I sat still in Him! Julie and I continued to walk and pray, as was our custom, asking the Lord to match us up with people who needed what He gave us to offer.

The group Coaching experience was more successful than either Julie or I expected. In fact, some men asked to be included in the next year's session.



One of our Cohorts

We prayed about it and decided we could do it if we had separate tables for men and women. Previously I'd thought of it as "woman to woman coaching," so I had to rethink it. As we

prayed about the following year, we decided to call it “Leader to Leader Group Coaching.” And our framework became our “Leader to Leader Coaching Framework.” We would be able to use the framework to coach leaders individually or in groups. We also realized it would be a great tool to use in coaching teams that were already working together.

We decided that a good strategy would be to hold a large event to draw in a large crowd. From there we would showcase other “next step” options. Some might be interested in group coaching, others in individual coaching. Still others might want help with team-building in their organizations. The framework kept everything organized, and once a leader understood it, we’d be able to say, for example, “In this workshop we will spend the morning on personal leadership, and this afternoon we will zoom in on some team-building.”

We offered several years of Group Coaching, and then we began to train small cohorts of coaches who wanted to use my framework. Many used it to organize their leadership coaching for individuals, teams, and groups. It also served as their framework for community or church presentations. Many strong leaders have continued to use the principles they gleaned from the simple framework God gave me.

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Facilitator Cohort, 2020

O'CONNOR COACHING LLC

As God continued to launch me into the community, I was asked to serve on the board for Mead Charter School, using all my gifts and strengths to help navigate that start-up. Then, Bob and I officially launched O'Connor Coaching, LLC in December of 2007.



Our Website

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Bob had done training with Dave Ramsey and would offer financial coaching, and I would coach leaders and teams. We thought we'd have something meaningful ready to go by the time he retired. Eventually we opened a little coaching room in the Heart of Wisconsin Chamber of Commerce. It opened up even more opportunities for leadership coaching and facilitating workshops in the community. I worked with business leaders, non profit leaders, and school system administrators, and I invited Julie to help me facilitate Leader to Leader workshops all over town! I was becoming known in the community for leadership coaching, and served on the Leadership program Advisory board, and Mead Charter School Board. Eventually I pursued more training through the John Maxwell organization, and it was there that I met Courtney Booth, one of the leaders I later trained to use my Leader to Leader coaching framework to organize workshops and coaching.

COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

After the success of WiLDFire events and Group Coaching, I realized that our community was starving for more events for leaders with shared values. I pulled together a very strong team of community leaders and we hosted the first Leadercast Event in our area. John Maxwell, with a line-up of other well known leadership gurus, filled the large screen at CLF. Lunch was served in the transformed gymnasium, and snacks and displays were in

the fellowship hall.



Hosting community leaders for Leadercast at CLF

We did this for quite a few years, and then it changed from Leadercast to Live2Lead. Eventually we combined with Plover and held it at Sentry World. The simulcasts gave me the opportunity to connect with community leaders, and I began coaching some business owners, non profit directors, a School superintendent, and several principals.

LEAVING STAFF

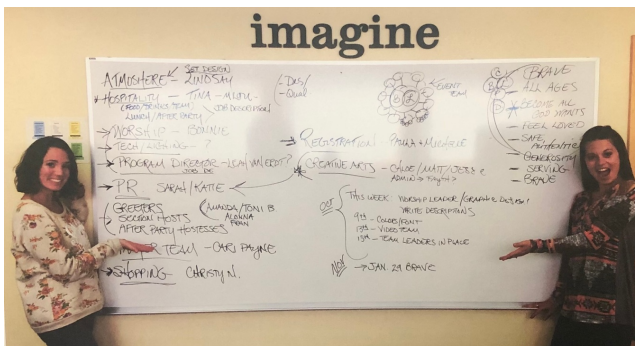
In September of 2013, it was announced that Jeff and Carey would become CLF's senior pastors. The board decided they would complete a three-year transition with Dean, who set them up to succeed by working them into all areas of responsibility. When it was announced, I knew that was my cue. I would lead the pack in stepping down from staff at CLF. It was time for the

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next generation to assemble their team and move the church forward, and I would cheer them on from the sidelines. I remember jokingly telling Jeff that it would be bad for us on holidays if he had to fire his mom!

BRAVE

It was fun for me to step back and watch the younger generation take the lead. Jeff and Carey had hired Matt and Bonnie Greene, and I was privileged to do Bonnie's life plan, and then several whiteboard sessions with Bonnie and Lindsay Urban.



Brains on the board - Bonnie & Lindsay

They had a heart for women and envisioned a women's Ministry called Brave. It was a special time for women at CLF. It was my pleasure to work with Lindsay on designing beautiful environments for Brave Events. It was so much fun to just show up and help with one portion of a large event without carrying the burden of the full load! And I LOVED doing whiteboard sessions with people. I've done hundreds of them over the years.

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My favorite comment after a session was from Pam Heckman who said, “So this is what my brain looks like!”

LOVE INC

Remember that I helped DaNita Carlson start the Restoring the Heart Ministry? She also became the director for the Family Center in town, and I did some team building sessions with them. I also coached her through some leadership struggles at the Health Department, and really enjoyed working with her. In 2017 when she told me about starting Love In the Name of Christ, I sensed that God wanted me to be involved. We had a good coaching relationship, and I love strategizing for a start-up so it was a good fit. I was also able to use my design skills to help promote the ministry in a professional way. I love helping communicate leaders clarify and communicate their vision with others.

Interestingly, God reminded me that I brought the concept of Love INC to CLF staff back in the day. It was determined that the timing wasn't right—but once again, God did not say, “never;” He just said “Not yet.” What a privilege to see God answering my prayer for unity in the church! I love that Love INC is a ministry that gives a hand-up rather than simply a hand-out. I've enjoyed coaching leaders, helping to build strong teams, facilitating board retreats and staff workshops, and serving on various teams such as Communications and the Transformational

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Ministry Team. (life skills classes for clients.) One of my favorite things to do was help transform the former sanctuary into a training center. What a blessing to have such a wonderful spot in our community to invest in leaders! I've taught workshops and facilitated brainstorming and strategic planning sessions with teams in this room.



The Training Center is a reality!



A Partner Church ministry team in a workshop

Zig & Zag



While all the Leader to Leader opportunities were happening, family life continued to swirl around me. My mind is a blur of memories including both professional opportunities and family times, woven together and scattered over the years! So please bear with me as I zig-zag my way through a sea of memories!

A whole book could be written about each child, as well as each year. I hope each of my kiddos will someday write a book with stories of their own! The family photos on our walls at home changed often as each grandchild grew before our eyes, and more little people continued to join our ranks! The grands were starting to grow up, and life continued to move on. Of course we all surrounded dad at mom's funeral, and Karen and I settled into a routine of spending time with him by phone and in person. We were a good team, and I was so thankful to have a sister to walk through that season with!

So let's zig and zag through a few random memories!

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Grandma's funeral, September 2011



Karen & I hanging out with dad

ROB & AMIE

Jumping way back—I'll never forget the very first time Rob was deployed. Amie and Riley were staying with us and we watched the news way too much. It was quite nerve-racking to see the troops moving forward before our very eyes! We determined that from then on we would not watch the news constantly, but only check in periodically. I'm so glad that she was able to be with us

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during that deployment. Since Rob was a Combat Controller, he was part of Joint Special Operations, and permanently stationed in North Carolina. He deployed with either Seal Team Six or Delta, and was gone for shorter, more intense periods of time than most of the military. Amie and Rob got into a routine in North Carolina, and she had a great support system there. I really loved visiting and collaborating with her on decorating projects!



A get-away

Amie's extended family was in Rapids, so they came home every Christmas and most summers. Bonus: they usually stayed with us! Those were always special times for me. I loved being there as they were in and out, chatting between visits with her family—I thrive on everyday moments of life.

I mentioned that Bob and I had traveled to Washington DC when Rob was named the Combat Controller of the year, and how

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much fun we had. Then in October of 2011, all the kids and spouses traveled to North Carolina where Rob was presented with the Silver Star. It was a special time of celebration, and it was wonderful to have the kids and spouses all together. Rob served so many tours in the Middle East—I lost track of the number!



Fort Bragg, North Carolina, 2011

When they settled in Southern Pines, Amie opened Sandhills Therapeutic Massage which became a thriving practice in the quaint downtown area. In the summer of 2015, I took Maddy with me to North Carolina to visit Kaleigh and Amie. I absolutely loved watching our girls enjoy their time together! We had so much fun and made some good memories!

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Pizza in Southern Pines

Then Rob and Amie made the decision to buy Bill and Fran's home, across the alley from Jeff! What a surprise to know that two of my boys would actually be neighbors! Of course, that meant they would no longer stay with us when they were in town, but the promise of having them eventually move back when Rob retired made up for it. I looked forward to having them close.



2014

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KATE & JON

After Minneapolis, Kate and Jon moved to Atlanta, and then to Pasadena where Jon completed his Master's at Fuller, and they planted another church. Then God called them to invest seven years in Baton Rouge, pastoring at the Baton Rouge Vineyard. In January of 2014, they welcomed sweet little Remy to the family, making them a family of six!



Remedy Isabella — January 29, 2014

They purchased a huge, unique looking, modern fixer-upper and set about making their vision for it a reality—s-l-o-w-l-y—one step at a time. I've always loved flying out to hang out with Kate, no matter where they lived. I love her chill temperament, and she usually has a fun project or two I can help with! We've had lots of creative adventures over the years, and I've often wished

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she lived closer so we could collaborate more often!

I also loved that I could talk to Jon about Church development. It was so much fun to hear his vision, and encourage him as he moved forward with a project or initiative. When I was visiting, the kids kept me busy too, with walks and all kinds of fun projects and activities. It was wonderful to be in their world and get a glimpse at how they were growing and changing each year.



Shepherd Luke - April 11, 2016

We welcomed Little Shep in Baton Rouge in 2016, and we were able to travel down a several times to hang out and help out. I loved being with them, and so enjoyed our time down there.

In the summer of 2016, Bob and I took Charlie and Max with us, and flew down for a visit in Baton Rouge. It was really fun to watch the cousins enjoy each other and make some memories.

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Cousins with Jon in New Orleans

A month later, it rained excessively in Baton Rouge, flooding communities and causing devastation for so many. Kate and Jon were poised perfectly to help in the emergency, and their church became a center of outreach, with people coming from all over to volunteer in the aftermath of the flood. When we visited in September, the streets were lined with literal mountains of debris from each home. People waited for bulldozers and trucks to remove debris, and contractors to help them re-build. When we got back to Rapids, I was so thankful for our little home on Lovewood!

After seven years, God moved Kate and Jon back to California to pastor the Foothills Vineyard Church in San Dimas. California

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had changed a lot in the time they'd been gone, and they settled in to bloom where they were planted. In recent years, we've had fun flying out to hang out with them, and re-visiting California.



Kansas City



Kate and her famous hat

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JEFF & CAREY

It was a joy to have Jeff and Carey's family close! I enjoyed helping with kids after preschool, and later, when Carey was able to pursue her dream of coaching basketball, I held down the fort after school 'til Jeff got home. It was so much fun to see her energy for coaching!

We had the kids for sleepovers—and longer stays when Jeff and Carey had a chance for a get-away! I have so many memories of crafts and games at the kitchen table, hot tubbing, costumes, pop corn and movies, and tucking everyone in at night.



April, 2011

I absolutely loved seeing Jeff and Carey “do their thing,” investing in teens in our community. Everyone at CLF loved them, and it was fun to hear all the ways they were making an impact.

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2011

Campbell Robert joined the family in 2012, becoming our tenth grandchild and number five for Jeff and Carey. Claim to fame: he actually took his first real walking steps at our house! Jeff and Carey were settled into their little home in Port Edwards with their little family of seven, and it was hopping with energy!



Campbell Robert — April 27, 2012.

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Carey's first office at CLF

When they moved across the alley to their current Victorian on the river, it was quite the exciting time! Over the years, I've enjoyed helping Carey with projects like refinishing furniture, decorating, and creating photo arrangements for the wall. I remember a conversation we had years ago about her dream of coaching and consulting. What a joy it is to see her dream become reality as she pursues her passion for coaching leaders!



2018

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TIM & TARA



Christmas 2011

Tim met Tara and fell in love. They were engaged, and then were married on September 29, 2012. Tara always drew out the best in Tim, and I was so excited that he found his special woman. It had been ten years since our last OC wedding, and it was so much fun—and more relaxing—to do it again!



Celebrating on the water

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At the wedding, I thought about how much my mom would have enjoyed that beautiful wedding on the river, with all the kids and grands together! And my dad loved that they took a little wedding cruise in the woody he bought for \$30!



Oh my—We're multiplying!

Tara encouraged Tim as he pursued his dream in real estate, while she sailed into her career in investment banking. They purchased their first home on Arbor Street, and allowed us to set up my dad's workshop in the basement. Unfortunately, they experienced a fire! Thankfully they were OK. One of the perks of being a realtor was seeing great possibilities in homes that came on the market. Before we knew it, they had moved two more times!

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I blinked and it was 2018—time to welcome little Rowan to Tim's family in Wisconsin Rapids! She was born when my dad was starting to fail, around the time we moved him up here to be closer to us.



Rowan Chloe - October 24, 2018

I got some wonderful snuggle-time with Rowan, and it was such a joy to hold a little one again! It was quite a contrast to see Rowan just starting her life, while my dad was nearing the end of his. I really enjoyed watching Maddy and Charlie care for their tiny cousin. It seemed like just yesterday they were my Littles, And now they were becoming expert care-takers!

GRATEFUL

Can I just take a moment to say—My boys have blessed me with the most wonderful girls in the world! I never could have imagined how God would answer my prayers for life partners for

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each of them, and what amazing moms they would become! He hand-picked each one, and I'm so grateful! And thanks, Kate, for bringing Jon into our fold! I've loved watching him interact with your kids, and I've especially enjoyed our conversations about church development over the years!



My O'Connor girls!



Favorite son-in-law—Master's completion at Fuller

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Together



My heart is full as I think of each of our kids and grands. I'm so proud of each one! Throughout the years, our family has gathered on Lovewood—sometimes just a few of us, and sometimes all together. Every mom I know wants all her “chicks back in the nest”—it's how we're wired!



Gathering

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We want to hold them close. But God designed the family to expand, and it becomes more challenging to stay connected as each child and grandchild form new “family circles” of their own. I’ve tried to be flexible and understanding in each stage of our family’s growth. My hope was to emphasize the importance of traditions, celebrating, and just being together—without causing the guilt and stress I felt as a young mom “trying to be everywhere, for everyone.”



Delightful pandemonium!

I must admit, though, sometimes I feel sad as I watch new family circles take shape... with each one, my new role takes me further and further away from the center. But then I choose to remind myself that God designed our roles to shift as we journey

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through life. If I'm successful, I will have passed on both solid roots, as well as wings.

I've determined to cherish the moments. I love our "all-together times!" There was nothing quite like hearing Rowan ask, "Are we going to sing our family song?" and hearing everyone raise their voices together! I can't think of a better theme song for my family.



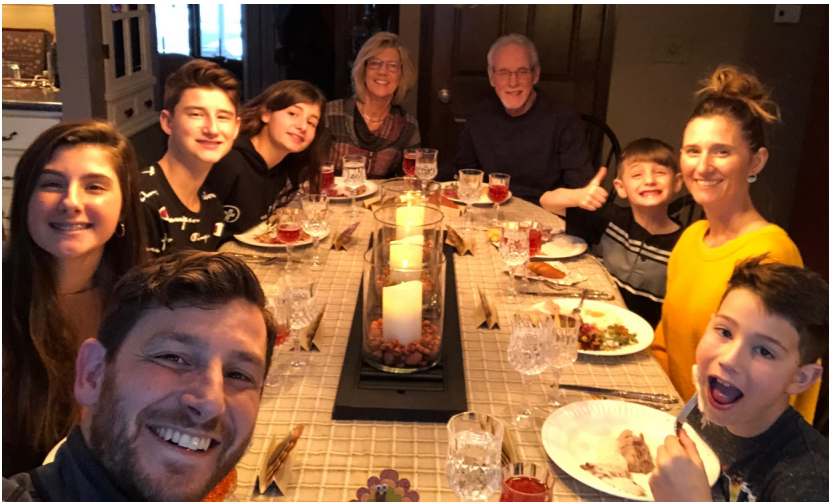
"Oh, the Lord is good to me!"

"Oh—the Lord is good to me! And so I thank the Lord—for giving me, the things I need, the sun and the rain and the apple seed. THE LORD IS GOOD TO ME! Amen! Amen! Amen-amen-amen! Ahh-men! Praise the Lord! Hallelujah! AMEN!"

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Turkey with Grandpa John



Thankful

I always thought it was odd to have two tables so close to each other in our home, but now I'm super grateful that we can still

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squeeze everyone together! Cooking has never been a passion for me, so I'm very thankful that God brought family members who happily share that strength so we can have yummy family meals!



Celebrating my chefs

My personal “hospitality strength”—and passion—is creating a beautiful and welcoming environment. I'm energized when I pull out my storage bins, switch colors and textures, and rearrange our living space each season.



Ready to make memories

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And once the fresh environment is created, I look forward to bringing a smile and listening ear to anyone who stops by.



Summer



Boys connection

As much as I love the idea of all of us being together, I've realized that it's the smaller interactions that I crave—and where I thrive. One thing I absolutely love is having each one

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come and enjoy just being at Gram's house... I love it when the Littles burst through the front door with all their excitement, and clamor for attention.



“To grandmother’s house we go!”

And whenever I pick them up to come for a little visit, we always sing, “Over the river and through the woods to grandmother’s house we go!”

It warms my heart when one of our adults stops by to chat a few minutes, or when our teens come over to hang out, work on a project, help with a task, relax, or have a heart-to-heart chat.



Stopping by

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Those moments are so very special to me. I love hearing about their lives, and I'm able to see God at work, both in them and through them. For me, it really doesn't get better than that!



My phone is a favorite!



Hanging out

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Cousins

Once when Kate's family was here, Remy asked, "Are we going to sleep under the house?" I realized she had never been in a basement before, so this was new experience!



"Under the House!"

One holiday season I had all the girls at the kitchen table for pancakes, and someone said, "I really like grandma's house—it's cozy!" Interestingly, on another day I overheard

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Judah, Max, and Creed having a similar conversation. They actually used the word “cozy” while trying to figure out what exactly made it that way!



Energy!

Next time I was at Hobby Lobby I bought the letters C-O-Z-Y to place above the entry to the family room. Every time I notice that word on the wall, I think of all those sweet little faces around my kitchen table. Just thinking about them actually makes ME feel cozy!



Cozy

Great Escape!



RETIREMENT!

Bob was really tiring of the day-in, day-out responsibilities and challenges of running his practice. He had joined a group of financial coaches from around the country who took what they had learned from Dave Ramsey and designed a comprehensive coaching system that could help people at various levels. He hoped it might be something he'd like to do after he retired. [www.Accountable.network]

We began planning in earnest and praying for a successor. We were fortunate to find a buyer for his practice—Karla McDonald, a local girl returning to the area. In October of 2015, Bob retired. After thirty-nine years of driving to 406 Daly, Bob would no longer walk through the doors of Riverhill each morning, and he was pumped!

Thirty-nine years is a really long time, and both patients and staff would really miss him. Everyone was there to celebrate him

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for his retirement party. When it was his turn to take the mic, he started with, “I’m having surgery on Monday...” and everyone sobered up. He continued, “They’re going to try to remove this permanent smile from my face!”



Dr. Bob’s very last patient before retiring

Everyone had enjoyed his sense of humor over the years at Riverhill, and they were sorry to see him go. He’d had a wonderful career there, and loved his time with patients, as well as serving as president of Riverhill for most of his time there. He loved collaborating with JoAnn and then Jenny, working out challenges, and talking about possibilities for the business side

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of Riverhill. But he was definitely happy to enter a new chapter of life. We also had a family gathering in the Dells to celebrate Grandpas' retirement with all the kids.



Celebrating dad's retirement, adult-style



Kids celebrating Christmas after the Dells

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One of his faves

Bob picked up radio controlled flying again, and still really enjoys that hobby in his free time. He is in charge of ground keeping at the field, and also serves as treasurer for the club.



Out with Colin & Campbell



Bob's fleet

It actually took us several years to really figure out what we wanted our retirement years to look like. At first we were both going at a pretty frenetic pace; there was a sense that we “should be accomplishing something major” every day. But after awhile, we settled into a retirement mentality. Rather than feeling “busy,” we kept an active—but healthy—pace of life. Bob enjoys taking time to read, meeting with friends for men’s Bible study, and doing lots of putzing around the house. Speaking of putzing ... a number of years ago, when I was asking everyone what their passion was, he told me that I was his passion! Other than that, he said he was kind of stumped. Then one day he appeared in the doorway with his paint-stained jean shorts, wife-beater tank top, and well-worn work boots, declaring, “I LOVE TO PUTZ!”

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[Not the noun—he is definitely not “a putz.” He meant the verb, “to putz.” According to my definition, “to putz” means “to wander around one’s domain, securing, repairing, trimming, maintaining, and maximizing, while listening to a podcast.” And he is super-good at it!

I’ve enjoyed doing some painting, and quite a few of my creations have been on display at the Central Wisconsin Cultural Center, our local art gallery. In 2023, one of my pieces was a finalist in the Wisconsin Artists Exhibit at the Richeson Gallery in Kimberly, WI, and two pieces were accepted for the BIG Little Art Show at the Peninsula School of Art Gallery in Fish Creek.



Dancing on Vero Beach, 2023—Acrylic

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Afternoon Walk, 2023—Acrylic



Cottage on Cranberry Creek, 2022—Oil

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Ready for the “BIG Little Art Show” in Door County, 2023

We have settled into this stage of life nicely, and are sure enjoying it! We look forward to time with family and friends, trips to Door County, winters in Florida, and enjoying some good shows in our favorite chairs each evening. We are so thankful for life’s simple, everyday pleasures. What a blessing to share a healthy pace of life together.



Together

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Peace Through the Turmoil



Home for Grandpa John's funeral, 2019

2019

My dad had passed away at the end of January after several challenging years, followed by an extremely stressful final six months. I found him in a pool of blood in his apartment! He had fallen, and had been laying there for hours. My sister and I decided it would be best to move him up here. So in one week,

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while he was in the hospital recuperating from his fall, Karen and I searched and found a place for him at The Waterford in Rapids. We also chose which things to move up here, and I did my best in less than a week to make his new room feel like home. Getting him settled in so quickly was exhausting, but we did it! We also finished closing down his apartment at Trinity. Then I completely cleared my schedule to spend many hours with him each day. That was time with him that I wouldn't have traded for anything! We celebrated his 99th birthday with everyone, and the following week he died. After the funeral, taking apart his room here, and settling all the legal, insurance, and banking issues, I breathed a sigh of relief, and we took a trip to Punta Cana.



Punta Cana

When we got back, Bob was struggling with kidney stones, but other than that everything seemed pretty good. Just when I

thought we might find our way to our “new normal,” Bob had a heart attack! In fact, they had to shock him back to life on the way up to Wausau. A stent was inserted, and he was good to go home. I was concerned about him, but I thought I was handling everything amazingly well—and I did for a few weeks. But then it started. My mind rehearsed over and over again the year with my dad, and the events leading to Bob’s heart attack. The reality that I had almost lost Bob sank in. What if it had happened while we were in Punta Cana!?!?! I felt overwhelmed. Stressed. Anxious. My body would just start shaking! I discovered I was definitely grieving—the loss of both my parents, and the loss of life the way it used to be....and the knowledge that I almost had to grieve the loss of Bob. Life would be different from now on. I was now the oldest one in my family—the matriarch.

My nurse practitioner ran tests and found nothing serious. Why was this happening? I asked friends to pray—often. All the things I usually did to combat anything similar did not work at all. NOT AT ALL. But I could feel God’s presence, and He was definitely teaching me things each day as I sought His face. And I tried my best to be engaged with family and friends. Sometimes I just had to use the Marco Polo app so I could answer back when I was feeling good. Short periods of time with grands were life-giving.

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By fall, I told Bob that I felt like I was in an intense spiritual battle and was literally fighting for my life! Julie & I prayed for wisdom, and I remembered a book that Amie had given me the year before. The author talked about the spiritual roots of disease. To make a long story short, I participated in two retreats they offered—one online, and one in Georgia. In each session, the presenters spoke truth which strengthened my faith and solidified my beliefs. I recognized the spiritual component to my illness, and was able to take authority over it. I had allowed Fear to get a grip on me by entertaining anxious and fearful thoughts. God showed me how to pull down that stronghold. I chose to change my thinking, and little by little my mind settled down and health returned to my body. If you are interested, you can find more about what I learned through various posts on my blog [<https://www.dianeoc.com/blog/categories/spiritual-battles>]

2020

I'm still marveling at how God totally prepared me mentally and emotionally for what was to come! In 2020, Covid 19 began to rock our world. From the beginning, I began to sense that "something was not right." It seemed there was a dark cloud hanging over us, and I discerned powerful spirits of Fear and Deception. It was easy to sense a spirit of Pride in Dr Fauci, as well as a spirit of Control. Thanks to the teaching I received at Be In Health, I rejected Fear, and prayed for Deception to be brought

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into the light. I started an online Bible study on Psalm 91 with Richelle, using Joseph Prince's book. It was so helpful to have that little online community, and to be studying about God's protection. I also decided to take an online mixed media class—Fabulous Florals. And after that, I took an acrylics class. It was wonderful to be creating, working with beautiful colors and textures!



Returning to my artistic roots

Lockdowns and masking seemed foreign to me, and I felt there was something wrong spiritually. We were God's Image-bearers. I believed that He intended our faces to reflect His glory - not be covered up! "Operation Warp Speed" was underway, and something was definitely not right. I continued to work with DaNita at Love INC to assure things went smoothly during this crazy time. That summer Kate, Jon & the kids came home, and

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we had a lovely, normal family time. How refreshing!

By fall, it seemed our country was growing even more dark, and the election was stolen from Trump. Then in November, Bob's sister Anne died unexpectedly, and her husband, Allen, was hospitalized with COVID. What a shock! It was so disconcerting to lose a loved one. Others we knew succumbed to it as well, and Fear was running rampant through our nation and the world. And yet, the things God taught me in 2019 prepared me to hold peace in my heart, no matter what.

2021

In January, little Cullen was added to Tim's family. What a blessing in the midst of so much chaos!



Cullen James —January 13, 2021

It looks like our family will be complete at twenty four, until each of our grands is married and we start multiplication all over

again! What a blessing it was to have little Cully to enjoy while the whole world was going mad! His birth reminded me once again what's most important in life.

Thanks to Kate, we were watching the Highwire each week, and were being exposed to expert scientists and doctors from around the world. We saw that early treatment options for COVID were being stifled—life-saving, well-known medications were being suppressed. Everyone was just told to wait for the “vax.” Bob’s friend from Marquette, Russ Gonnering, also emailed things he was discovering as he served on an international team. They were scrambling to research possible COVID treatments with current, tested drugs. We also connected with Dr. Smyth and bought Ivermectin to have on hand. Those things were being ridiculed and rejected by mainstream media, and this was happening around the world. We prayed for wisdom, and began to prepare physically for rough times. A deadly drug, Remdesivir was being pushed on anyone in the hospital, and hospitals were being reimbursed for every COVID patient they treated. We felt like we were in the twilight zone, and often Bob or I would ask, “Is this really happening, or are we just crazy? ” And yet... I had peace in my heart.

We spent two weeks in Florida and loved it! We determined to go back for a month the following year, Lord-willing. Judah came to stay with us for the summer as he worked at Sand Valley as a

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caddy. Kate rode across the country with him and it was fun to see them drive up in his corvette.



Road trip complete!

As the year continued, we did our best to live life normally. But people all over the world were being bullied and lied to, and it became apparent to us that something was definitely wrong. Censorship was rampant. We started a group called Citizens Engaged to bring Christians together. We showed the Biblical Citizenship video teachings about the constitution, and what our country is founded on from a Biblical point of view. We offered it again in the fall. It was good to be together, but we came to the realization that things were very much out of control globally, and we could best make a difference on a local level. Only God could save our nation at this point. The election was

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manipulated, and innocent people were arrested because of the protest on January 6th. People were being divided in every way possible. Transgenderism was being pushed like never before. Parents were being villanized for standing up at school board meetings to express their opinions on how all this was impacting their children. Our national debt was more than out of control, and millions of people poured in illegally; our country was close to collapse. And yet I had peace in my heart, recognizing that this was actually a spiritual battle and we would win in the end. I chose to continually shift my energy and focus back to God's Kingdom, rather than the mess in our country and the world.

2022

In January, I offered a Bible Study at Love INC called Truth-filled, and the training center was full of women looking for connection in this crazy season. By now you could see that the whole agenda was pure evil, and it was much bigger than simply COVID. We continued to watch the Highwire and Agenda Weekly. Hearing from US and experts from around the world was giving us information the mainstream media was not telling us. Even though people were trying to go back to normal, the so-called vax was being pushed like crazy—even with bribery and bullying! People were having reactions to the shots, and they were being silenced.

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The war in Ukraine began, and in March we had a little respite, spending the month on the ocean in Vero Beach. Spending time once again with our cousin-friends, Kathy and Dick Nordberg, brought us full circle. Our connection grew close again—even richer than the hours we spent together in our 20's. And Florida's sunshine and warmth filled me with joy and energy! I took an oil painting class while I was there, and painted a lot that month. I felt like I was returning to my artistic roots.



Lots of laughing!

Judah returned to Rapids again for the golf season in 2022, and this time he came with friends. They rented from Uncle Tim and Aunt Tara. Rob and Amie moved back to Rapids for good, after an extensive remodeling season, so all three boys were back in town! Tim and Tara moved to another home on Prairie View, closer to us. One summer day, there was a lot of “in and out” fun

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visits from our teens, and I loved it! It dawned on me that we actually had—count 'em—FIVE O'Connor households in town for the summer!

Then in July we celebrated 50 years of marriage! The kids planned a wonderful family celebration. Adults went to dinner on Friday night in a limo driven by one of Tim and Tara's drivers, and on Saturday the girls planned a lovely brunch. They even moved Rob and Amie's furniture into the backyard so we could all be together at tables in their family room!



July 22, 2022

My most cherished memory is having EVERYONE participate in one complete family photo shoot at Fireman's Park. With twenty-four of us, it was getting tough to have everyone in the same spot, so I was really touched to have everyone there. Madison had come back from her time in YWAM, and introduced

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us to Kai, the special man in her life. What fun to meet him! Max and Kaleigh were making plans to intern at CLF first semester, and then both would head to Kona for YWAM in January. Now the next generation is starting to leave the nest. It was so much fun to hang out with all my teens and young adults, hearing about their plans for the future.

Then, in the midst of such joy, we learned that Carol had passed away from Pancreatic cancer. How devastating for Bob to lose a healthy younger sister! Our hearts grieved for the whole family.

2023

It's nearing the end of 2023 already, and life continues to march on. It is another full year, and many memories flood through my mind like a fast-paced slideshow. Sadly, we lost Bob's foster sister, Marilyn, this year, too, so now Bob is truly the last one alive in his immediate family. Hard to believe they are all gone.



Siblings—Bob, Carol, Anne, Marilyn—2012

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Losing three siblings in two years is pretty sobering! With the girls gone, I think it made our time with cousins, Kathy and Dick, even more special this year. This year, we spent two months in Vero, and once again the sunshine and warmth filled my soul! And being across from the boardwalk, and observing the ocean is such a joy!

When we returned to Wisconsin in May, we turned another corner in life again—this year our first grandson (Riley) graduated from college!



Celebrating with Riley and Rachel

Man, where has the time gone? And now he is off to complete his Master's at my old Alma Mater! Hard to believe I was at UWM over 50 years ago!

And our first granddaughter (Madison) married Kai Porter! What unbelievable joy to see our next generation start finding their true loves! Before we knew it, a full summer came and went.

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What a blessing to be able to share so many special moments with our family! As I write this, Maddy, Kai, Max and Kaleigh are all together in Makapala, Hawaii for YWAM leadership training.

I am trusting that God will take each one of our grands on the life adventures He has planned for them.



Welcoming Kai to the family

Passing It On



Taking time to look back on the years God has gifted me has been quite eye-opening! I can see His hand on every part of my life as I step back to get a glimpse of His bigger picture.

We may often feel like the journey of our lives is full of “highs and lows,” or “best and worst experiences.” I’ve often heard the analogy of “mountain top and valley experiences.” In fact, there have been times in my life when I’ve actually felt like a yo-yo — going up and down as I reacted to what I perceived as highs and lows in life. When I use that analogy for life, I find my emotions swinging up and down with ever-changing life experiences!

In reality, both good and challenging times run parallel throughout our lives—the good and bad moving side by side throughout the years. Rather than a series of mountains and valleys, it helps for me to picture life more like railroad tracks. One side represents the joys, the other represents the challenges. With this analogy, I’m finding it’s more about “my mindset in

the middle.” The middle is where I recognize God is in control no matter what. It’s the place where I choose to trust Him. Jesus reminds me, “I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33 The tracks are constant, running side by side, and every time I round a bend to unforeseen territory, it’s up to me to choose where my focus will be. From the middle I can choose—Will I focus on the “bad,” or on the “good?”

Using the railroad track analogy to look back on my life, I can recognize the blessing of being planted firmly in the middle where Jesus held on to me, offering His joy and peace as I journeyed around all kinds of bends in uncharted territories. For example, when I faced an illness, it felt like I was traveling in the dark; it almost derailed me as I started to lean toward and focus on the “bad track” that brought pain, fear, and anxiety. But when God helped me re-align my thinking with His Word, I chose to refocus my attention and intentionally turned my eyes to the “good track.” As I slowly traveled for months around that unknown curve, I began to recognize God’s blessing as I focused on His closeness, His mercy, and His grace carrying me through that phase of my journey, and I even discovered joy. Oh, don’t get me wrong! The “bad track” was still there all right! But as my focus shifted, so did my outlook on life. And as my mind-set

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changed, eventually even my physical body responded to the peace that God provided for me during that season.

I'm so thankful for the years God has blessed Bob & I with, and that we were able to spend time with each of our children and their families, as well as enjoying some wonderful times all together ... winter holiday dinners around the table, gathering in the family room by the fire, building snowmen, sledding, ice skating, art projects ... and we've had fun-filled summer visits with kids flying back and forth from our house to cousins, and boating, water skiing, outdoor movies, berry-picking, more art projects.....and sleep overs! When I scrolled through my photos to choose some that give a taste of the full life we've been living, it's impossible to choose! I randomly grabbed a few so I could remember of some of our wonderful, everyday moments. Let me end with a few words for my kids and grands:

My life story will continue here on earth until God takes me home. My greatest prayer is that one day each of you will join me there! I've decided that as I approach each unknown curve on the tracks of life, I will choose to remain firmly planted in the center, and I hope you will too. Let's choose to experience God's peace and joy, no matter the circumstance. Let's be thankful for our blessings, and encourage others as we praise Him for the journey! I love you all!

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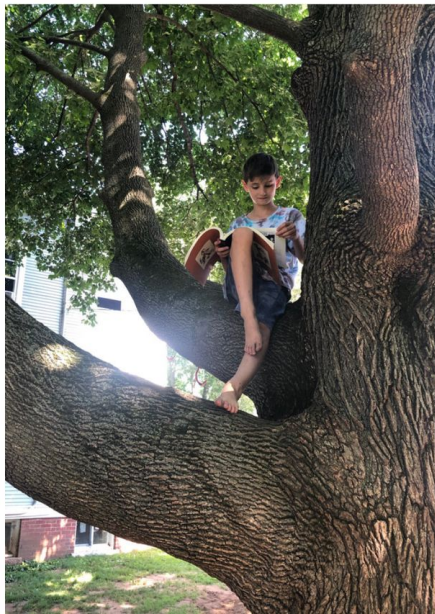
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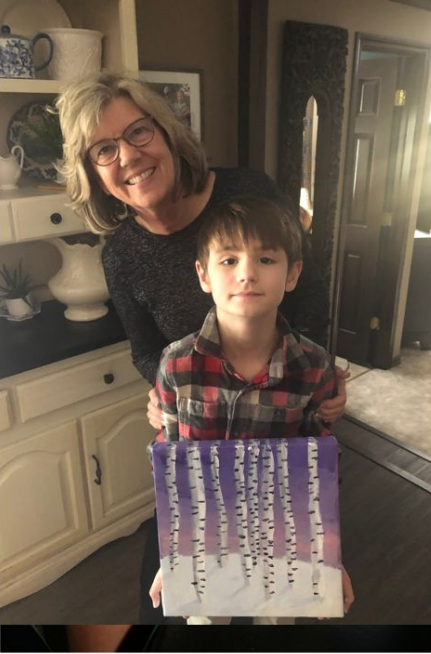
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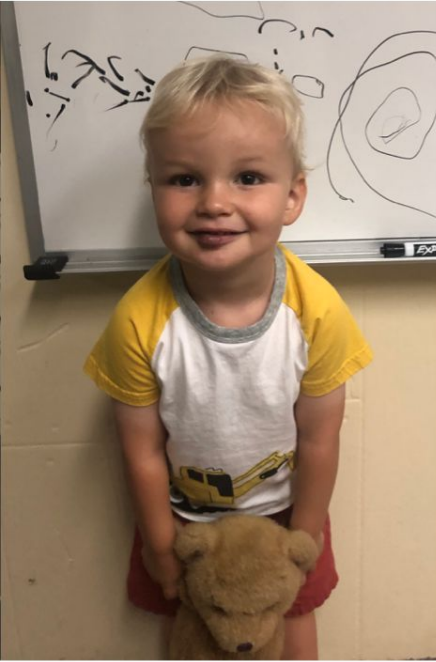
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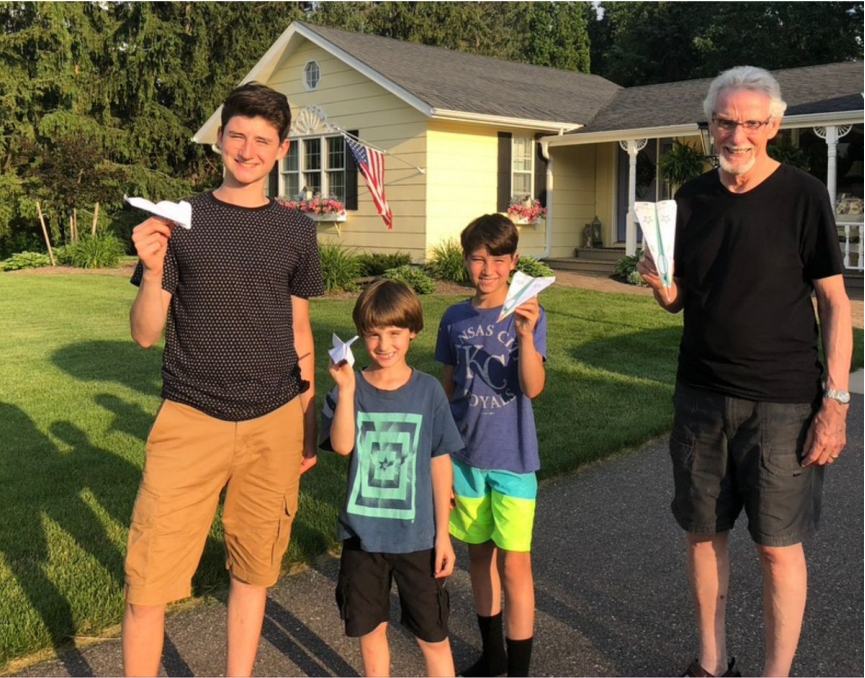
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Love you all!

