

The passing of a friend gives reason to reminisce

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She always signed her cards and letters “Barbara.” And I came to think of her as being in the same class as some of the famous Barbaras the world knows like Barbara Stanwyck, the great actress. Barbra Streisand, the great singer. Barbara Bush, the wise woman and wonderful grandmother.

My Barbara was a great woman, too. Very musical. A whiz at trivia and Scrabble. Witty. Funny. The perfect hostess. A loving and devoted mother and grandmother. A lifelong Elvis fan. An accomplished writer. And so much more.

I first met Barbara back in the mid-1980s. I'd just started a new job in her hometown as the newspaper's chief photographer. I was young. I didn't know anyone. I was far from home. I was a little tired. A little burnt out. A little lost. And wondering if my move from my old newspaper to this new one was going to work out.

One day, Barbara made a special trip to the newspaper just to tell me how much she liked one of my photos. That's when I first encountered her kind and generous nature. That's when I had the first hint that she was unusual. Not because she knew everyone in town, which I'm convinced she did, but because she had such an encouraging spirit. She had the ability to meet someone and immediately know what was special about them. What kind of encouragement they needed. How to pray for them.

And she did pray. To her, faith was not just a word or something you practiced for an hour on Sunday morning. She didn't have to practice her faith at all. She lived it out each and every day. In looking back, that must be why she was such a joy-filled person. When you have Jesus in your heart, you have joy even during tough times.

Barbara included me in on some of her family celebrations. She did that for a lot of people over the years. Once someone crossed her path and/or her threshold, they were no longer a stranger.

It was Barbara who told me about a trip to England she was taking with a group called “Friendship Force International.” Its aim was to promote understanding and friendship between cultures. I was able to go on that trip, too. That's when our friendship really took root. Everything was a learning experience for her. Everything was a delight. When I wanted to take pictures of her next to the figures in the wax museum, she not only posed, she carried on complete conversations. Barbara made the most of that trip. When we returned, she did several programs for groups and nursing homes. She was a sought-after speaker. Her enthusiasm for life was contagious.

Eventually I moved. Eventually I met my husband and got married. One time we were going through that area and we stopped so Barbara could meet him. Of course, she immediately took a liking to him and him to her. No matter how long it has been since I've seen Barbara, I never felt that she was far away.

Somewhere in our decades' long correspondence I started calling her "Barbs." I'm not sure why. If she was still here with us, I'm sure she could tell us. But I do know that "Barbs" was my name for her, as if she was so full of life one of her was not enough.

In later years, she didn't get out of her apartment much, but her words traveled great distances via Facebook and also through a column she wrote called "Remember When."

It's no surprise that when her daughters posted earlier this week that she passed away, people began writing in from all over. Time and time again someone would write something like, "My heart is breaking. I miss my dear friend whom I never met but knew well." Barbara ministered to people with her loving, caring, kind, generous nature. Person after person spoke about her wit, her faith, her humor and especially her encouraging words. In this time of technology, which she embraced, she also still sent cards and letters galore.

My life is so much richer for having known her. I think about what Jesus said when the disciples asked him, "What's the greatest commandment?"

"To love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself."

Barbs certainly did just that. After all the people in Heaven quieted down from their rejoicing to see her, I know without a doubt that Jesus Himself embraced her and said, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Well done, Barbara!"

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