

5-24-13 Politics, Parks and Poetry

Each year tens of thousands of people die from cancer in our state alone. When you read the incident and rate reports at the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, you are reading it from an epidemiological point of view. There are types and trends, all adjusted for gender, age and ethnicity. The trends are interesting because there is the suggestion of success, with decreases in some, along with the increased incidence in others. These reports might be read with rapt attention when you learn of a loved one with cancer in your attempt to figure things out. How did this happen? Where and when did this begin? Then, you quickly move on to investigating what can be done.

We have a long way to go before we prevent cancer and/or learn how to stop it in its tracks. Someday it will happen. I have no doubt of it. Someone will think out of the box and think like a cancer cell and work with it long enough to stop it. In the meantime, we sadly lose people to the “C Word”. It is a tragic way for life to end, for it is all-consuming. Some people are brave enough to take that walk with cancer with dignity and grace. Such was the journey of Gail Briggs, of Plympton, who died last Thursday exactly one year after the discovery of her cancer.

The discovery came the day after last year’s town meeting where the people of Plympton overwhelmingly voted to use Community Preservation Act funds for land to be purchased for the cost of the taxes owed. The importance of the particular parcel of land was that it would provide road access to the town owned (but little known) beautifully wooded area including the highest point in Plympton, known as Cato’s Ridge. There will be a dedication to Gail Briggs as the primary force leading to the park known as Churchill Park.

Primary force is an understatement, when it comes to the accomplishments of Gail Briggs. If she needed to study soil maps to learn whether or not Cato’s Ridge was a gold mine of sands and gravel, then that is what she did. It wasn’t; and she presented the proof to put that concern to bed!

Long before Gail worked (tirelessly, I might add) for parks in Plympton, she envisioned open space, trails, conservation land and protection of wetlands. There was research to be done and people to contact. There were surveys to learn how the residents wanted to use and enjoy the town. There were meetings, both small and large and attendance at many public meetings.

She once told me that if someone had to be obnoxious to tell the truth at a public meeting, then she was the one obnoxious enough to do so. She made me laugh but I knew what she meant. She was a truth seeker and a truth teller. There’s nothing obnoxious about that. The

founders of our country had that quality and she did too. That is something to admire and reckon with.

Her diligent and untiring pursuit of preserving and protecting nature wasn't without fun. There were walks and talks, politics and poetry. Sometimes there was a phone message, "We are having High Tea on Sunday at 2:00, if you can make it." That was code for drinking wine, eating whatever snacks we could muster and talking about the scuttlebutt from the coffee shop. Oh, the scuttlebutt!

She taught us that being an intellectual and having fun are not mutually exclusive. On any given day, this woman who championed open space and enjoyment of nature, had in her living room, in addition to the files and piles for conservation projects; books, books and more books. Books that she actually read! There were books about history, politics, nature, and poetry. She was remarkably humble about her knowledge and interests. You had to ask; otherwise, you just became accustomed to the fact that maps, studies and books were part of the fabric of her life.

One time I asked her what she majored in at college and she answered, "Well, if Simmons College had offered a major in poetry, I would have majored in that. They did not, so I read as much as I could and they encouraged me to learn business skills." I was intrigued. Of course, she had applied business skills to the Annasnappet Horse Farm, but to what else I wondered. "I needed to learn patience," she told me, "so; I worked in printing for a while, with an old printing press, one letter at a time, making invitations and brochures." This woman would never cease to amaze me.

She had traveled the world as the daughter of an army man, perhaps the "army brat" but eventually the embodiment of dignity and grace; hard earned through patience, practice and poetry.

Known to many as the "Horse Whisperer", she loved all creatures, great and small. In the midst of the lushest time of year and the return of her beloved barn swallows, she was finally allowed to pass on, for her body had become a shackle from which she could not escape. Her mind and spirit were unchanged. She was gracious throughout the one year detour brought on by cancer. "Are you comfortable? Would you like some tea? I'm sorry I am such a wet blanket. I'd love it if you would read some poetry."

Rest in peace dear Gail. Plympton will have parks and there will be poetry.

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