



Neoma Sparks

March 19, 1935 - May 12, 2012

Neoma kissed Death on Jan. 30, 1983, when she had a severe heart attack while vacationing on Maui. A month in hospitals' excellent care and a quadruple coronary artery bypass graft enabled Neoma to return home to Corvallis. Her original bypasses still functioned, keeping her alive 29 years later. But the heart damage was permanent, and now, caught between the twin pincers of heart failure and kidney failure, she is taken from us to reside in the house of the Lord.

Neoma was born in Seattle to Richard and Genevieve (Gel) Benshoof Ward. She lived in Seattle the first 36 years of her life. She attended grades K-8 at Bryant Elementary School, followed by four years at Roosevelt High School, graduating in 1952.

At Roosevelt, deciding it was better to be involved than to observe, she ran for and was elected to the student council/cabinet and girls club cabinet, and also as junior class treasurer and senior class treasurer. She was also chosen by faculty for the Golden Spurs, an honorary group of doers and achievers.

Her biggest accolade came from the Roosevelt girls. At the end of each year they voted to honor as "Rose Maidens" four outstanding girls for their contributions to promoting the high ideals of their school. Neoma had the singular honor of being chosen as Rose Maiden in each of her four years of high school. Neoma went on to the University of Washington, where she always had a part-time job, became a Kappa Delta, enjoyed all aspects of college life, and graduated in 1956 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in

education. She began her career as a high school English teacher first in Kent, Wash., and then in Shoreline, Wash.

It was in January 1953 that Neoma, a UW freshman, met Herb. What began as casual friends who had occasional “dates” digging razor clams at Copalis Beach, crabbing at Padilla Bay, or hiking on Mount Rainier — anything as long as it was free — gradually became a bit more serious until early 1955, when Herb was inducted into the U.S. Army for two years.

Romance was put on hold for a while — although, truth be told, Neoma never claimed to have sat around alone being bored during Herb’s two-year military hiatus. In December 1956, Herb came home on leave for Christmas, asked the big question, heard a “Yes!,” and the two became one on June 8, 1957.

The next 14 years inexorably sped by, with slight pauses when Neoma gave birth to three daughters and two sons, and when the family moved four times to houses with one bedroom more than the home before. During these years, Neoma became a stay-at-home mom with sufficient part-time contract school work to keep her out of mischief.

On April Fool’s Day in 1971, Herb, who worked for Boeing, became a former Boeing employee. The subsequent job search brought the family to Corvallis. On 1972’s April Fool’s Day, they purchased their present home. The next 40 years passed in several phases. The travel-for-fun phase lasted from 1975 through the late ’80s. Neoma’s mother went on several cruises, and invited Neoma and Neoma’s sister to travel with her. Over the next several years, they cruised to Alaska; through the Caribbean and the Panama Canal; in the Adriatic, Mediterranean and Black seas; to the Canary and Madeira islands; and from Singapore south and east through Indonesia. Along the way, they also visited the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand, Spain and Morocco. Neoma learned far more geography than in school.

In the Crossroads era, from 1980 to 1985, Neoma hosted 15 foreign students from France, Greece, Germany, Australia and Japan. Her correspondence with three in France, one Greek, and two Aussies continued to the present. We have visited the homes of all six, and two have returned to Corvallis to

visit us.

François was the first student, hosted in 1980. His youngest daughter, Laëtitia, has twice visited us in Corvallis for a month each time, and honored us by adopting us as her third pair of grandparents!

Vacations with Herb, from the late '80s to 2003, included tours of New Zealand, Australia, Fiji, Panama, Costa Rica, Spain, France and Greece. The bed-and-breakfast decade of 1990 to 2000 was perhaps Neoma's most pleasurable. She created her B&B from scratch. The decor, furnishings, recipes, name, logo and all the other details were hers. Plus, she got to greet, chat and laugh with a continuing stream of interesting and happy people — and get paid for doing so! It was a sad day for her when she had to give it up for health reasons.

The bereavement period began in September 1989, when her 31-year-old daughter, Neoma Lynn, died of hemolytic-uremic syndrome, often referred to as the E. coli disease. Neoma's grief for her daughter was inconsolable, but she found GREG (Grief Realization and Education Group), an Albany support group for parents whose child has died. Through mutual sharing and support, she was able to ease her sorrow. A bereavement ministry to help others in their grief was formed in 1995 at Saint Mary's Catholic Church in Corvallis. Neoma signed on at the start, helped in the group's formation, and until the week before her death, ministered to the needs of others. Then in September 1997, her 34-year-old son Blake drowned in a boating incident, compounding her sorrow, and the group she helped create was helping her.

Some common threads that ran through Neoma's life from youth to death were her eagerness to enjoy all aspects of life, her acceptance and concern for everyone around her, and her unfailing cheerfulness and good humor. And the one thing that Neoma is certain to be remembered for is her laughter. Her laugh was more than infectious, flowing freely from her mouth and heart, turning misfortune — both her own and that of others — into humor. To Neoma, laughter made life worth living; laughter overcame all the failings of

her body; and most important, laughing together with other people helped them become great friends.

Visitation is set for 5 to 7 p.m. Friday, May 18, at DeMoss-Durdan Funeral Home, with a brief informal prayer ceremony at 5:30 p.m.

A funeral Mass will take place at 9 a.m. Saturday, May 19, at St. Mary's Catholic Church. Private interment will follow at St. Mary's Catholic Cemetery.