

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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REACHING OUT

by Emmy Bledsoe

The first time my husband Art and I were in Africa was in the late 1950s. Art was an officer in the US Air Force, and I joined him at Nouasseur Air Force Base, located about an hour from Casablanca, Morocco. Throughout our three-year stay, we explored Morocco with great interest and vowed to return someday to see other parts of the fascinating African continent.

Upon Art's discharge from the military, we settled in the States, built a home, and raised our family. Art resumed his corporate career. I eventually learned about adults in our own community who could not read. I was appalled and decided I would like to do something about it. I was introduced to Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) and was convinced that I had found my niche!

I became a VISTA (Volunteer in Service to America). In that capacity, I worked with LVA to establish and strengthen

community organizations throughout New Jersey by training volunteer tutors and establishing numerous non-profit organizations.

In the early 1990s, Art and I returned to Africa and visited many countries, including Tanzania. My desire was to visit schools, because I was interested in knowing if English was being taught. I left my business card with the school offices in case a student might be interested in writing to us.

As it turned out, there was a young man named Lazaro. A teacher who knew of his desire to go to high school handed him my card and urged him to try to contact me for financial assistance. Lazaro came from a large family with many siblings. His father had explained to him that there was no money to pay for his high school, so he would have to continue tending goats and cows. Lazaro had to tend the animals after school, but he had strong ambitions to move out of the village to further his education.

Much to my surprise, a month after returning home, I received a letter from Lazaro. He wrote that it cost money to attend high school and asked if I could finance his high school experience. Yes! We worked it out, and I regularly wired funds to him which he received in Arusha, Tanzania. He graduated from high school, attended college in South Africa, and graduated. We were corresponding regularly by email, and he explained that he wanted to help his people—particularly the Masai, as he lived in a Masai village. He was concerned about their lack of educational opportunities. For example, his father had four wives and a total of 28 children. Consequently, there had not been resources to pay for Lazaro's high school. They paid other obligations by trading livestock such as cows and goats.

Lazaro was determined to establish organized assistance, and so he asked me how to set up a non-profit organization. He eventually set up a private non-profit called ALMASI to do just that. By then he had a wife, Yassi, a daughter, Nosim, and a son, Saruni.

In 2019 Lazaro emailed me, and I was astonished that he and his wife and children were living in Chicago and that he was attending the University of Northern Illinois to obtain an MBA. WHAT? He is here! My daughter immediately reacted with "Mom, let's go see them," but then COVID hit to delay the trip.

When the pandemic calmed down, Lazaro wrote that he had received his MBA and his family wanted to drive to my home in Newtown, Pennsylvania. in August 2023. That was fine with me. I was very excited and happy, as I had never actually met any of them.

So—they did. They stayed at Pennswood as my guests for two nights. I arranged a get-together with friends on a Wednesday afternoon at the Bistro. The family dressed in their own Masai style of clothing and attended the party, where they were welcomed with open arms! They told their story including future plans to help their people and their country.

Lazaro talked of how he grew up in a Masai village on the rim of Ngorongoro Crater. Masai are a tribe that lives only in two countries: Kenya and Tanzania. There are about 100 different tribes in Tanzania, each with its own language. The language that unites them is Swahili. By tradition, until Lazaro's father's generation, in order to gain permission to marry, a young man had to be able to kill a male lion using prescribed weapons like spears, but no firearms. Lazaro also explained that to go to high school, a student often had to leave the family. Lazaro left his family and lived at a boarding school in Arusha.

I happily sat with friends and family and listened as the story was told—full of

love and concern for fellow human beings and hope for the future. They plan to remain in this country so that their own children receive a sound education and will continue to manage their non-profit along with their own jobs.

I can't help but reflect that from one small gesture—giving my business card with a hope to have maybe a Tanzanian pen pal—all this developed.

A SUMMER TO REMEMBER

by Ed Baer

In the summer of 1960 after my second year of NYU Law School, I decided to hitchhike around Europe. My bible was a paperback copy of *Europe on \$5 a Day*. Believe it or not, you COULD do it then! Don't try it now! Columbia University had a charter flight to London, leaving in June and returning in September, at a very reasonable price. So I signed up.

My Rutgers fraternity brother, Jules, was then attending medical school in Leyden, Holland. I figured I could go see him, and we could travel together. However, he had taken an internship at the Hadassah Hospital in Tel Aviv, Israel, and had to report there. I decided to go along with him. He had a Vespa scooter, and we packed up all our belongings and

started out for Italy. Don't try this!! you have to be young and foolish!

From Holland, we sped through Belgium and Germany and into Switzerland. Going over the Alps on a fully loaded scooter is NOT recommended—but very exciting—or it was until we got a flat and almost went over the edge.

Arriving intact in Italy, we finally ended up in Naples. From there, the plan was to ship the scooter back to Holland and take a ship to Israel. Having some time to spare, we checked out the Isle of Capri, Sorrento, Mount Vesuvius, Pompeii and Amalfi.

We sailed on the Israeli ZIM line to Haifa, whereupon Jules left me to begin work at the hospital. I spent a month in Israel working at a kibbutz; journeying to Tel Aviv and Jerusalem; hitchhiking through the Negev Desert in August (don't try this!); seeing the Sea of Galilee, Bethlehem, and the Red Sea; and attending an Arab wedding where I became incredibly sick to my stomach. I spent a surreal time surrounded in the desert by the Israeli Defense Forces on maneuver.

I had to get back to London to catch the plane home, so took another ship on the Mediterranean to Greece. Then I rented an auto to whip through Yugoslavia to Germany, to the French Riviera, to Spain, to Paris. During the trip, I

attended many music festivals: I went to Bayreuth for Wagner and Salzburg for Mozart. I enjoyed the Paris Opera, and the Oberammergau Passion Play. I arrived in London just in time to catch the charter.

While I didn't do the whole thing for \$5 a day, the total for three months including airfare was only about \$1000. To keep the costs down, I slept in youth hostels for fifty cents a night (bring your own sheets) and used a Eurail-pass traveling on the train during the day and sleeping there at night between destinations.

Thank goodness I did it while I was young.

COINCIDENCES —OR KARMA

by Margaret Carlough

For seven years in my twenties, I worked at IBM's data processing headquarters in White Plains, New York.

One weekend, I was going home to my parents' house in Short Hills, New Jersey. I got on the Erie-Lackawanna train and sat in the middle of the car. Why did I choose the middle of the car? I don't remember, but the ends may have been more filled up for easier egress, or it

might have been that I remembered busses gave an easier ride in the middle and assumed the same was true for trains.

As the car filled up, an older man, from my then perspective, sat down beside me. We started talking. "Where do you work," he asked. I told him I worked for IBM in White Plains.

"Do you happen to know . . .," he started. I said, "Wait a minute, there are fifteen different locations of IBM in White Plains and thousands of employees."

He then proceeded to ask about the person I shared a cubicle with.

Another amazing coincidence involved my aunt Dorothy (we called her Aunt Doff), and her long-time housemate, Katherine Van Bibber, who had been head of a school in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. They were looking for a house in La Jolla, California. The realtor drove them all over, and they hadn't seen anything. One of them said, pointing, "What about that house?"

The realtor stopped the car and went to the door and knocked. A woman answered. The realtor asked if the house were for sale. The woman, looking perplexed, asked, "How did you know? We only decided to sell a half-hour ago." Then, looking beyond the realtor, she

exclaimed, "Miss Van Bibber, what are you doing here?"

She had been a former student in that North Carolina school.

OCTOBER FANTASY
by Phyllis Purscell

Leaf fall reveals a second squirrel nest
in the Japanese cherry tree, smaller
than the one we've known for years.
I see it as a mother-in-law addition.

I imagine Grandma Squirrel discovering
child rearing comes back to her as easily
as riding a bicycle would, had she ever
done that.

She leaves the little family alone of an
evening,
curls up in her tidy apartment, dreams
about
the old days, remembers her dashing
husband.

Having always yearned to live in a tree,
I envy the domestic arrangement of
this squirrel family of my invention.

My house would not be a house, as such,
but the tree itself somehow my home.
I've yet to work out the details.

The birds would come to accept me in
time;
I'd be sought out by returning robins.
The local newspaper would lose interest,
and
I'd soon recognize each constellation in
its season.

THE RAVINE
by Helen Villa

Mt. Washington in New Hampshire, at
6288 feet, is the highest peak in the
northeastern United States. The moun-
tain is notorious for its erratic weather,
having recorded a wind-speed of 231
miles per hour at the summit's observa-
tory in 1934. Perhaps you have ascended
the western slope on the Cog Railway, or
driven on the Auto Road to the summit
from the east, or even hiked the
Appalachian Trail to the Lakes of The
Clouds hut.

There is also another trail on Mt. Wash-
ington to Tuckerman's Ravine that is
dear to die-hard skiers in spring. When
the rest of New England has lost its
snow, and the lifts have closed for the
season, they head for the snow in Tuck-
erman's. The Ravine is a glacial cirque on
the southeast face of the mountain
which averages up to 55 feet of snow in
a typical winter. After the danger of
avalanches has passed in April and May,

the remaining snow pack is adequate to attract hundreds of skiers. They come from Canada and as far south as New York City. I was one of those skiers.

In the 1950s it took about eight hours to drive from the city after work on Friday nights to the Appalachian Mountain Club lodge at the bottom of the mountain. After a short sleep and a hearty breakfast, my friends and I strapped our skis, extra clothing, and lunches to our backs and headed for the trailhead. We wore our ski boots (too heavy to carry) and used our poles for climbing. There is a 2.4-mile hike from there to the Ravine floor, about 1,850 feet of elevation. Up to this point the trail is a typical rocky, mountain hiking path. But then the vista broadens into a sparkling snow paradise. The surface under foot becomes corn snow, and you hear the swish of skiers slaloming down an open bowl. You find a comfortable boulder on the side of the Ravine to leave your lunch, tighten your boots, and proceed to one of the lines of steps carved into the snow by skiers climbing up into the bowl. There are no lifts.

Since your ski legs haven't yet been tested that day, the first run will usually be from halfway up the bowl—you leave the line of steps at a crevice big enough to use as a platform to put your skis on. The crevices are vertical snow packs that have separated from the bowl surface behind them leaving an opening into which it is

very easy to drop a glove or sunglasses never to be seen again. I'll never forget that the first time I approached a crevice, I was told to be wary of "snow snakes"—Oh-h-h those gullible city people! Then comes the moment of truth. The first run of the day on a very steep slope. Whatever you do, don't fall because all of your hard climb up those steps will be wasted. I still remember with pleasure the exhilaration of skimming down an open slope on a sunny Saturday morning in April. After a few runs, it was time to retire to "lunch rocks" and watch the others. By late afternoon, exhaustion set in. We parked our skis at the bottom of the bowl in a hopefully well-remembered spot (no need to carry them up to the bowl twice) and headed down the mountain for a well-deserved supper and rest. Sunday morning brought the hike back up to the bowl.

The ride home was long. But Monday, at work, I still retained the remnant of another world.

Days in the clean New Hampshire air, a communion of like-minded individuals, and the joy in the ease and ability that the young have to move their bodies are memories one never forgets.



TUESDAYS WITH JOHN

by Brad Sheeks

“I couldn’t mow the lawn anymore,” John tells me as he glances out the window.

I’d been having lunch with my friend John almost every Tuesday in 2013 until he died of Lewy Body Dementia on December 29. Hovering in the shadows of our conversations was the awareness that John was dying. I kept journal notes that year.

January 8, 2013

Audrey opens the door with a warm smile. John welcomes me into their new digs, a two-bedroom unit at Atria, an assisted-living facility across the street from the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. Audrey kisses him on the top of his bald head, blows me a kiss, and leaves us to our own devices. We start on our plan to have lunch every Tuesday. He offers me a glass of water and returns to his soft chair by the window. I’m surprised and pleased at the ease with which we start conversations about our lives.

February 19, 2013

As is the case with every visit, after we’ve talked for a while, we go down to the dining room for lunch. The Atria wait-staff know that he will order a BLT on toasted whole wheat bread. At first, people wonder if we’re brothers and come over to be introduced. We both have

white beards in a similarly trimmed style and show a lot of skin on our foreheads. John is shorter than my 5’ 8” and a little chubbier. His face is more rounded. When our lunch is over, John walks with me to the lobby. We give each other a hug and go our separate ways, pleased by our little adventure.

June 25, 2013

As we’re leaving the dining room, John brings me over to a glass case in the lobby. It contains several art objects and pictures on three shelves. A placard sits at the back of the top shelf: THE JOHN AND AUDREY SHOW.

“Our place in Cape Elizabeth, Maine.” He points to a picture on the middle shelf. “That’s our house. We upgraded the kitchen.”

“That’s a mansion!” I blurt out.

“Well, yes. We got it at a good price since it needed work, but we had a good architect—yours truly.”

“What about that trolley car?”

“Every Wednesday, I’d drive down to a shop in Kennebunkport where we restored old trolleys. They gave this model to me.” It is painted yellow with the word *Connecticut* on the side.

I point to his drawing of the lighthouse. “Yes, we loved Cape Elizabeth,” John

says, as he closes the door of the display case. He turns to give me a hug, and I see that he has teared up. I hold the embrace for just a second longer.

November 6, 2013

“I can’t draw anymore.”

“What happened?”

“What happened was that I walked out to Logan Square and couldn’t draw the fountain.” He’s weeping. I wait. He looks up and makes eye contact. “Brad, I can’t make my hand draw a simple picture.”

“This is so hard.” I’m tempted to talk about times when I’ve said to myself, *I can’t do this anymore*, but I feel John needs me just to be present and give him my full attention. An image comes to me of us walking in a deep wood, side by side, on a path that turns out of sight not far ahead.

November 20, 2013

“What do you think happens when a person dies?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t know,” I repeat. “All we have are stories we tell ourselves. Something to believe.”

“Okay, what do you believe?” John asks. I take a breath and answer, “John, I believe that dying is like a raindrop falling into the ocean, into the water. My soul will return into its source. Then just as a new drop of water is formed from the morning mist, so also my soul is formed from an infinite number of sources and joins a new body.”

“Where did you get that kind of idea?” John asks with a skeptical frown.

“It comes from the Buddhist idea that every single thing, material and spiritual, is a composition of an infinite number of parts.”

“I like the image of the soul as a drop of water,” John says.

“Whatever happens will be interesting,” I respond.

December 10, 2013

We’re in the dining room. I hold his sandwich in place on the plate as he grasps the knife and cuts a slice. I pick it up and put it in his hand. He holds it with thumb and index finger. Brings it to his mouth. Such a simple thing, feeding yourself.

“I might be done here, Brad.”

“Time to leave,” I respond.

“Yes,” he whispers, then struggles to get out of his chair. Steadies his hand on my outstretched arm. Stands. Turns. Takes hold of both handles of his walker. Takes that first step. I glance at several of his friends who are watching. We exchange a nod. John and I leave the dining room. For the last time.

December 18, 2013

“I keep seeing weird things, Brad. I’ve gone mad!”

“No, John. You’re not going mad. You’re hallucinating from the meds.”

“You have spots all over your face. Looks like measles.” He reaches out to me. I take his hands and rest them on his chest. I read “When Death Comes” by Mary Oliver. Mozart’s *Requiem* is playing at a gentle volume, filling the room with a sense of mystery. Tears roll down his face as he drops off to sleep.

Friday, December 27th.

Audrey and I sit at his side.

Our hands covering his, resting on his chest.

No more words.

Silence.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

by Rufus Hallmark

Recent articles about names inspired me to share thoughts about mine: Rufus E. Hallmark, Jr. My father is deceased, so I have dropped the “Jr.” tag, but I leave it here for a reason you will soon understand.

I was traveling in Europe years ago and fell into conversation with another person in the old-fashioned train compartment, the kind that had facing rows of four seats. Across from me sat a fellow about my age dressed in a tweed jacket, a shirt with a button-down collar, jeans, and loafers—unmistakably an American!

My fellow American asked my name, and I told him, “Rufus Eugene Hallmark, Jr.” To which he remarked, “That’s a lot of baggage to carry around!” Not knowing exactly what to make of this remark, I just let it go and failed to ask his name, which he did not offer. When we arrived at our common destination, we searched for inexpensive lodging, which was not hard to find in Europe in the late 60s. As he signed in at the hotel desk, I peeked over his shoulder. His name was Rance Lavalley Hunsucker, III!

Years ago, I began to wonder why I had been given my father’s name, and more to the point, why my paternal grandparents, originally a farming family in

southwestern Arkansas, had named their second son “Rufus.” I’m sure they didn’t know Latin and that *rufus* means “red” like the red-headed English king William Rufus or the rufous towhee, a bird with a russet patch on each side. My grandparents said they had named his older brother Repherd after a circuit-riding Baptist preacher. Never have I ever encountered anyone else named Repherd. I often wondered if the preacher’s name had been Rupert, a name they had probably never heard and mistakenly misspelled. Anyway, my father was never called Rufus, but Gene, a short form of his middle name, Eugene.

My parents were married in 1942, shortly before my father joined the army and was sent to Europe. My father’s troop ship sailed the day I was born—Dec. 24, 1943. I have always wondered why my mother decided to name me after my father, giving me the first name he never used. Then a possible explanation came to me. Young men were being killed in the war every day, and my mother must have dreaded getting a death notice. My father was not there to be consulted, and I doubt very much he would have wanted to name me after himself. Mother decided to give me his name, thereby granting him a kind of immortality. A sentimental speculation, I know, but I like it.

WRITER’S PROMPT: WELCOME

Village Voices Editors are delighted to welcome new residents moving into Olmsted and Paul. The minute your last box is unpacked, we hope you’ll begin to regale us with stories of your entry into the Pennswood community. We’re looking forward to your becoming readers and/or contributors to *Village Voices*.

Old timers, would you like to say welcome? Tell newcomers what you want them to know about our community?

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