

BETTY WAS HER NAME


ELIZABETH KOHL HENDRICKSON

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Betty, Elizabeth, what is a name? It wasn't until Betty was about four years old that she learned her real name. She was old enough to get a library card and was proud that she could write her name, Betty. No, her mother said. "your real name is Elizabeth." Imagine the shock to hear that the name you went by for your young years was not your real name. She had to learn to write her name all over again with those extra letters.

Betty's handwriting was always in beautiful cursive, learned early in a Catholic school, taught by demanding nuns. She was proud of this ability and, until she was into her dementia and could not write, her signature was always in the most legible script. Handwriting for most of us deteriorates with age, hers did not.

Betty excelled in many things during her life. She learned to sew when dresses were too expensive, and to cook when her mother was too busy with her medical practice to prepare dinner. Knitting was a mathematical game for her. She was an excellent student. When she took physics in high school, the boys always wanted to check with her before setting up an experiment – they were scared of doing the wrong thing. Mathematics came easy for her and she loved Chemistry. She learned history and geography from her interest in stamp collecting. She ended up as valedictorian in high school, much to the chagrin of the boys in her class.

In college, she chose Chemistry as a major and received a copy of The Merck Index (with her name embossed in gold letters) for the highest grade in Organic Chemistry. In her senior year, Betty won a prestigious National Science Foundation fellowship for her first year in graduate school.

Betty and I first met in a square-dancing class at Pomona College when she was a junior and I was a senior. We were science majors and had to take PE courses in the evening because our afternoons were filled with labs. We seemed destined for each other when we first met: In addition to both being Chemistry majors, her mother and my father were both physicians, and all our parents came from Wisconsin. We started dating and by Summer, when we were both doing research for the same Chemistry professor, we became engaged. We knew more than anything that we wanted to get married.

At the end of that Summer, I went off to graduate school at the University of Illinois in Champagne-Urbana while Betty finished her senior year at Pomona. She came to Illinois after her graduation to start graduate work. At the end of that Summer, we traveled by train to California where we were married on August 20, 1960 in the Associated Colleges Chapel in Claremont. This was one of our happiest days.

Our honeymoon was a two-week road trip back to Illinois. We arrived in Urbana for the Fall semester. We had a small furnished apartment in a house upstairs from that of our landlady, and just a few blocks from the Chemistry buildings.

Our son, Matthew, was born the following August. I had only another year of work before I finished my Ph.D. thesis. Betty then decided to quit with a Master's Degree – she wanted to raise our children at home, unlike her mother who was always too busy with her medical practice.

We moved around the country – Berkeley where our twin daughters Krista and Klara were born in 1963, then Dallas – and finally ended up in Northfield, Minnesota where I taught Chemistry at St. Olaf College. When our kids were in high school, Betty joined me as a research assistant, and later continued in that role in the Chemistry Department at The University of Washington after we retired from St. Olaf in 1996. We both retired from UW in 2000.

We raised our family – Matthew, Krista, and Klara – in Northfield, a good place for our kids to grow up. We grieved the loss of Klara in a bicycle/automobile accident when she was a sophomore at Pomona College. In Northfield, Betty worked with an environmental group taking photographs of wildflowers in a marsh restoration project, and was also active in the League of Women Voters. She taught our children math and chemistry at home when they were growing up.

After we moved to Seattle, we became interested in traditional folk music. I bought Betty a hammered dulcimer, which she loved to play. She played it at open mics and our monthly house jams.

Betty was my “anchor.” Her advice was always good and kept me on an even keel. She took over our financial planning – she was better than I at doing taxes and financial transactions. I credit her advice in contributing to our retirement funds, which resulted in a healthy retirement income. She was also proficient at reading the fine print in buying and selling our homes. All these things and more I later had to learn to do myself.

I watched with sorrow and grief as she progressed, over eighteen months, through the stages of her dementia. I had to learn to become *her* "anchor." She passed away in July, 2021. I am now beginning a new chapter of my life without her.

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