

Reflections on My Life



Joan Lewis

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Reflections of a Hospice Patient: *Joan Lewis Shares Her Memories and Advice*

Hospice of The Gorge is offering hospice patients a chance to tell their life stories, and to share their stories with others. The goal is to give family members a keepsake — something they can pass-on to their loved ones. It's also aimed at offering those of us living here in our community, insight into what goes on in the minds and hearts of hospice patients as they near life's end.

Deborah Jaques, Executive Director of Hospice of The Gorge says: “We have so much to learn from our patients. Their lives are rich in history. They have a wealth of wisdom gained over years of life experience. We're fortunate that some of our patients are willing to share their stories. They are truly precious gifts.”

This is the story of one such hospice patient — a long-term resident of The Dalles, a gifted artist, wife, mother, and friend. Her name is Joan Lewis. The story is captured as an interview between Joan and a hospice worker.

Editor's note:

Joan's story was handed out at her funeral, and published in its entirety as a feature story in *The Dalles Chronicle* shortly after she had died. Her brother, who had not seen her for years, remarked that the story sounded exactly like the sister he remembered.

Are you afraid to die?

No, not really. I'd be ready to die tomorrow if I had to.

I think it's because I've been a relatively happy person all my life. I've had lots of laughs and lots of friends — and I've had some really great times over the years. I traveled a lot and got to meet some very interesting people. I was also an artist for a while. That was really great.

Then, of course, there's my family. I love them all dearly.

Don't get me wrong, I haven't gotten to do *everything* I would have liked, but I've done enough.

I'm even happy right now — not deliriously happy of course, but the sun is warm and the garden's beginning to grow. That makes me feel real good.

And I'm sure that my medicines help. I think they've got me on cloud "two" right now. Sometimes I think it would be great to be on cloud nine, but cloud two is fine.

What do you remember about growing up?

I guess I was pretty much of an "army brat." I think of Washington D.C. as my hometown, but my dad was a graduate of West Point and our family moved all over the world to be with him.

I didn't start living permanently in The Dalles until I got married, but when I was in the first grade, my family and I moved to Bonneville, where my father was the first resident engineer at the dam. We only lived there for about a year • and I was certainly way too young to have had any thoughts about ever coming back. But, of course, I eventually did.

Then there was my brother. Oh how we quarreled as kids! I guess I was jealous because I was kind of homely with straight hair, and he was a truly beautiful child. Everyone always paid a lot of attention to him. But now I love him dearly.

Then what happened?

After that, we lived all over the place, but China really stands out for me. My father was stationed there during WWII, and my family was on the first boatload of dependents that arrived there after the war. I was 16 at the time.

It was really exciting — especially for a 16-year-old back then — to be that far away, in such a different kind of place.

The Chinese people were wonderful, and I tried so hard to learn to speak Chinese. But I was a dismal failure • probably because I was tone deaf!

Anyway, we spent six months in Shanghai, where I attended the American School, and another six months in Nanking where I had a job as a filing clerk for the U.S. Army.

I sure didn't want to spend that first six months in school. I was much more interested in dating ensigns — which is probably why my parents got me a job for the second six months. They wanted to keep me out of trouble!

But eventually, in 1950, I ended up marrying one of those ensigns anyway. He was a pilot. We were very much in love, and I remember him to this day.

But that was just before the Korean War started, and he was killed during maneuvers in a mid-air collision. That was only three months after we were married. It was a very sad time in my life, but I have a wonderful child as a result of that marriage.

How did you come to The Dalles?

Well, after China, I ended up going to the University of Oregon, and I dated a fellow by the name of John Lewis. I didn't marry him then, but years later I met him again at the wedding of a mutual friend. He obviously still liked me, because that very evening he took me up to the Crown Point overlook and proposed.

I didn't say "yes" right away . . . I had too many things going on in my life. But eventually, of course, I did.

We came here to The Dalles because John was an attorney, and he descended from a family of attorneys that lived here. His aunt, who also lived here, needed some help at the time, so the timing was good for us to move.

Eventually, John took in some partners, and created the law firm of Lewis, Foster, and Peachey. It's now called Foster Peachey and Young.

At the time, I had no desire to come here. I thought: "Who would want to come to a little hick town like The Dalles?" But I ended up loving it. And I'm thankful we got here when our children were still small; having kids is such a great way to meet new people.

How did things work out?

We had a very happy marriage, and always had a great time. We had four children — John, Jim, Kathryn and Karen, in that order. John was actually fathered by my first husband, but my second husband adopted him and raised him with all the others, just as if he were his own.

We were a close-knit family. We always made a point of sharing things with each other. Even today, my family knows everything about me, and if they didn't know something they'd want to know, well, they'd ask.

Tell us about your life as an artist.

I started out working in “fabric art” — which is anything you can do with cloth: quilts, embroidery — whatever. I still have an embroidered piece I made that depicts “Chicken Charlie’s Island” in the Columbia Gorge.

But after a while I decided that painting was an easier and quicker way to create images, so I began to work with acrylics. And I’m pleased to say that my paintings and fabric art have ended up in a number of private collections.

One of my very dear friends, by the way, is Judith Cunningham —she’s a gifted and well-known artist here. We became really close when our husbands were both terminally ill. We did art together, and it helped us to deal with the kinds of stresses we were under at that time.

Given all your experience, what advice can you give people?

Be kind. People should be nicer to people. Everybody should be nice to everybody, whether they feel like it or not. If I had it to do over again, I’d be more considerate of others — less self-centered.

What are your thoughts about mistakes you may have made?

Sure I’ve made mistakes, but realistically, I’d probably go on and make the same mistakes over again. Everybody makes mistakes. It’s just part of life. We do our best, but sometimes that’s not enough.

Do you have any regrets?

No, not really. I’m sad that I can’t do my gardening any longer . . . and I suppose I regret having never gotten to Paris. But my husband and I traveled to so many places over the years, mostly on trips organized by our dear friend Philip Klindt. We went on dozens of trips with him and his wife • we went to places in the U.S., Asia, Europe, South America . . . everywhere it seems, except Paris. I had a rich life.

What’s the worst thing that ever happened to you?

The worse thing that ever happened to me was the death of my daughter Kathryn three years ago. I’ll never forget it. It still affects me. My husband died ten years ago . . . and that was hard. But my daughter’s death was worse. You never expect to have to bury your own child.

How are you able to manage now?

All of my children, especially my daughter Karen, have been very supportive. But my daughter-in-law Harriet, who lives nearby, has been especially helpful. I don’t know what I’d do without her. She comes over every day and helps me; she cooks for me . . . she does everything. Eventually, when I need more care, she may move into my studio and stay here full time.

Hospice, too, has been one of the most marvelous things that could ever be. A nurse comes in once or twice a week, and she's always bringing things to help me – special pillows for my bed, other devices to make me more comfortable. She's a real sweetheart, and the care I get from Hospice is just excellent.

Your daughter-in-law Harriet must be a very special person.

She is. The funny thing is, she was married to my son for twenty years, and then they divorced for twelve years. They just remarried last week. I was really pleased to be able to go to the wedding.

Do you talk to people about the fact that you're dying?

Of course I tell people I'm dying! Why wouldn't I? It's true.

But sometimes I think people aren't ready to hear it. They don't know what to say when you tell them that you're dying. In fact, someone just called me the other day to ask if I was going to participate in a charity event again this year. I said "No . . . I'm dying." The woman gasped! She was really shocked. I thought it was funny.

Looking back, what's really important in life?

Freedom: Freedom to believe in and do whatever you want to do. I really don't like people telling other people what to do and what to think.

What about religion . . . does that help you now?

I'm a member of the Episcopal Church, but I'm not a big believer in too many orthodox Christian notions about death and the afterlife. All I really know is that I'm going to be cremated and buried alongside my husband and my daughter when I die.

Have you come to any conclusions about the meaning of life?

Damned if I know! Maybe to reproduce — to keep this old world going. I really don't know.

How would you like people to remember you?

People can remember me any way they want. I guess they'll think of me the way they've always thought about me. I can't change anyone's mind now.

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