

VOX POPULI

Remembering Michi Weglyn

Michi Weglyn's great adventure in life came to an end on Sunday, April 25, in New York City. Long before her terminal illness, I said I would not write her eulogy. There are others more deserving and better qualified for that task. They are the activists, academics and achievers who will know the right words and proper phrasing.

Michi and I had a friendship that lasted for over 55 years stretching from adolescence into widowhood and old age. It all began at Gila, perhaps a most unlikely place and yet the most appropriate place. Gila was the enduring bond between us; two distinctly different women with conflicting likes and dislikes. But on the values that mattered most, we were in perfect accord. Further, we were friends in the truest sense of mutual affection and esteem. So, it is as one of her oldest friends that I write about two things, her illness and an appreciation.

There has been speculation about the length and nature of Michi's illness. It began in the summer of 1998 when she complained of a swelling in her stomach. After her father's death from stomach cancer, many years ago, she obtained his medical records, intuitively thinking the same disease would eventually claim her.

Michi and her late husband, Walter, were advocates of alternative medicine. When the doctors at Sloan Kettering suggested she have exploratory surgery she declined. One of her fears was the excessive use of anesthetic. She was convinced a previous anesthetic overdose had impaired her memory permanently.

Rejecting traditional medicine, Michi opted for psychic surgery in the Philippines. Although I had great reservations about the procedure, I made no attempt to deter her. She was the most stubborn person I ever knew. Her tenacity served her well in intellectual pursuits, but often worked against her in practical matters. On her return, she was euphoric, believing she had obtained the perfect medical solution, what I called "a quick fix."

Grateful for this reprieve, she plunged into several projects requiring completion. Her work was never done. However, the euphoria was short-lived. In early December, she complained about uncontrollable and constant diarrhea. Nutrition escaped from her body as though through a sieve. Exhausted and uncomfortable because of her swelling stomach, she was house-bound. By Christmas, her deterioration accelerated. "I'm dying," she said. "I know," I responded.

Maybe anyone else would have found comforting words of hope, even if false or imagined. But that was never the nature of our unique friendship. We agreed to limit our contact, saying everything that needed to be said, had already been said. Previously, we talked at least once a week, sometimes twice or three times.

When she originally resisted traditional medical intervention, I respected her wish. We used to josh about how we were going to die. She even prepared her scenario, of being clothed in her favorite teal robe, reclining on the sofa, closing her eyes and entering eternal sleep. Then in a phone call, she said, "Death isn't bad. It's getting there that's hell."

I knew it was time to call Art, because her discomfort was becoming overwhelming. Art Sasahara is a special friend, also from Gila, he is a distinguished professor of medicine, emeritus, of Harvard Medical School and a world acclaimed cardiologist and researcher. I explained

Michi's situation and Art quickly offered to call her. Through his professional persuasion and personal charm, he was able to eventually convince Michi that she could not delay traditional medical assistance if she wanted relief. He wanted to insure her comfort.

In her few remaining months, Art was an invaluable source of support and information. He became the intermediary between Michi and her doctors. She looked forward to his calls. Memories of a youthful infatuation, I am sure, contributed to the rare, genuine joy she expressed on hearing his voice. And he conscientiously kept her advised of his traveling schedule because he is in great demand as a lecturer here and abroad. In a surprising gesture, Michi invited Art to visit her because she ordinarily discouraged visitors. It gave me inordinate pleasure to know my two most brilliant friends enjoyed one last brief encounter.

For the last two months, Michi required private nurses around the clock. She wanted to die at home. Her financial resources permitted the fulfillment of that wish. But there are some things beyond monetary purchase. They are priceless. Michi's daily support was a gift from her friend Kimie Ito. At the forfeiture of her private life, Kimie was a constant companion, who ran the necessary errands, prepared the foods Michi craved and was also the telephone contact for many of us. I was embarrassed to make three weekly calls so late at night, but Kimie always brushed aside any apologies, sensitive to my concerns. Michi repeatedly said, "Kimie is a saint. She brightens my room with her radiant smile."

I know that observing Michi die was most difficult for Kimie, given her sweet and sensitive spirit. For me, even acknowledging from a distance, that my friend was slipping away was fraught with anxiety and pain. So I can imagine, but can never appreciate precisely, the pervasive sadness and feeling of futility that Kimie experienced watching Michi die, day after day. Cancer is a cruel and invasive disease. For Michi, it was also loathsome and humiliating. But she endured it with courage and dignity. She died at home as she wished.

The last time I talked with Michi was April 15, less than two weeks before her death. She called me twice that day. I prefer to defer revealing the nature of our last, long conversation. However, I mention it because I realize she would want her friends and acquaintances to know that she was perfectly lucid to the end. She never lost her intelligence or her quirky sense of humor.

If Michi had a regret, she expressed it in her last letter to me when she wrote on Feb. 11. "Extend my apologies to all whom I've not been able to write, phone, hug. My gratitude and love to all of you." In the last few weeks, it was difficult for her to read, so either a nurse or Kimie read all the wonderful letters and cards to her. They brought a smile to her face and lifted her spirit. She also appreciated the flowers and fruits and gifts of food. And also the telephone messages conveyed through Kimie.

As one of her oldest friends, I consider it a privilege to write on her behalf and thank all of you for your kindness and good wishes that she received with much appreciation. I know, too, that she wanted me to pay public tribute to Ms. Kimie Ito of New York City and Dr. Arthur A. Sasahara of Newton, Mass. They were Michi's two friends who accompanied her to the end of her mortal journey and then let go. There is no greater gift than friendship.

(Sachi Seko, a longtime friend of Michi Weglyn, lives in Salt Lake City.)