



MARY SICKINGER HENDERSON

12/9/1949 – 5/22/2022

Mary Sickinger was born in Reutligen, West Germany, on December 9, 1949. Her father, Kurt, had been on a waiting list of refugees seeking to leave Germany for the U.S., and his sponsor, Uncle Hans in Westwood, NJ, was none too pleased to learn that what had originally been a single in-coming relative, but had then already become a two-some when Kurt married Mary's mother, Herta, was now a three-some with a newborn infant. Kurt and Herta's number came up for a ship's berth to the U.S. a bare three weeks after Mary was born. They made the trans-Atlantic trip with their three-week old infant and arrived in Westwood, where they settled. Kurt and Herta were a classic immigrant success story, taking on extra jobs and working seven days a week, spending virtually nothing on luxuries or self-indulgences, saving pennies by buying the dented cans of food that had been discounted at the supermarket. They were not educated people, but they were smart, industrious, and self-sacrificing, and, in the long run, more successful than many.

In the home Kurt and Herta still spoke German – or Schwabisch, a dialect – but Mary refused to learn it, as she was, if anything, embarrassed by her family's foreign-ness. In primary school, the first time roll was called and the teacher came to her given name – Mariluise – she defiantly said that was not her name, her name was Mary. And when her mother would pack her a lunch of liverwurst on pumpernickel, Mary would hide it under the lunch table, take bites as discreetly as possible, and wish she had a pb&j or tuna fish like all the other kids.

Later on, of course, Mary came to recognize and have great appreciation for the difficult and hard-working lives her parents led, the tremendous sacrifices they made, and the successes they achieved. She in fact took after Herta in a number of ways, particularly her happy, upbeat, positive nature, and her love of yard sales, supermarket BOGOs, and sales and bargains of any

kind. But throughout her childhood she wanted little to do with her German heritage or home life. She spent as much time as possible at the houses of her American friends in Westwood. In her early teen years she fell in love with horses and riding, and spent countless hours at a local stable, getting riding time in exchange for helping to groom the horses and clean the stalls. Anyone who has met Mary in her adult life, and has known her irrepressibly positive and enthusiastic nature, would likely not have recognized her during those teenage years, at least not within the Sickinger household. She was, by her own account, a difficult and unforgiving child, self-conscious and embarrassed by her immigrant parents, and eager to get away from home.

Mary did well in school, to the point that her advisor tried to steer her toward some of the more elite New England colleges. She chose instead, partly due to financial circumstances, the Forsyth Dental Center, affiliated with Northeastern, and received an Associate Degree as a dental hygienist. She worked for only a short while in a dentist's office, instead quickly moving into dental research work at Forsyth. She delighted in the reaction she'd receive upon telling people that one of her jobs there was to operate the guillotine, decapitating the rats that were used as fluoride study subjects.

It was during this time period that she met her future husband, another story she enjoyed telling. Her then-boyfriend was, by her account, a somewhat possessive and jealous type, and simply refused or ignored her occasional suggestions that it was time to break up. In the mid-summer of 1971 he was on a flight from Boston to JFK in NY on his way to a six-month stint working in a kibbutz in Israel. He happened to sit next to some guy who was working in Boston for the summer prior to his final year in law school, and was on his way to a friend's wedding in New Orleans. During the short flight to NY they carried on a perfectly ordinary casual conversation. But as they were about to deplane, the boyfriend suddenly turned to this guy and said, "Hey, there's somebody you should meet," and handed him a note with Mary's name and phone number. The guy considered this – from a total stranger – to be roughly the equivalent of a name scrawled on the wall of a Greyhound bus station men's room. But he took the note, and it wound up among the detritus on top of his dresser, where he later came upon it as he was preparing to leave Boston and go back to law school in Chicago.

The "guy," of course, was me, Wayne, and the short form version of the story is that Mary and I met up and had a pleasant enough lunch, but there were no fireworks. She at that point was looking for the Marlboro Man, whether on horseback or a motorcycle; I wasn't really looking for anything. The next communication between us was over a year later, when I returned to Boston, still had that scrap of paper, and made another phone call. This time there were fireworks. Mary and I were married on September 5, 1977, at the Vale in Waltham, with featured entertainment by the Whiffenpoofs of 1969, one of my Yale singing groups, and an octet of Tanglewood Festival Chorus friends doing an offbeat medley of 16th century madrigals and 1960's pop music.

Shortly after we were married, Mary decided to go back to school, and received a B.A. from Boston College, and then an M.B.A. from Simmons College. She worked for a number of years at Gillette in their new business development group, until the child-rearing years arrived.

On June 13, 1988, after an interminably long wait on an interminably long list, the phone rang as we were getting ready for what we thought would be a perfectly ordinary day at work. It turned out instead that our prayers had been answered. It was the adoption agency calling to tell us we had three hours to be at their office to pick up a three-week old baby boy – our first child, Matthew. We felt like we had won the lottery. But since it had happened so suddenly, we were also totally unprepared and scared to death. We had no idea what we were doing. We immediately called all our friends with young children and said, we don't even know what we need – equipment, furniture, clothing, general baby stuff -- but can we borrow it? What a day that was! Friends came from all over, dropping off cribs, strollers, baby-carriers, clothes, diapers, bottles, toys, champagne, whatever. It became an instant impromptu event, a Flash-Mob Baby Shower. Very exciting. And terrifying.

Exactly three years later to the day, on June 13, 1991, the scene almost repeated itself. Again, out of the blue and after a long wait, the agency called to invite us in to meet a six-week old baby girl, together with her birth-mother, Courtney, and her mother. That was a meeting, and a set of relationships sitting across from one other, that was truly unique – a little awkward at the start, but then both sad and happy, as Courtney said her goodbye and our darling daughter Willa was placed in our arms. Our lucky June 13 became our “Family Day,” and we always tried to do something special as a family each year thereafter.

During those child-rearing years Mary was, as you would expect, actively involved in anything and everything there was to be actively involved in – play groups, parent organizations, school fundraising and other volunteer activities, as well as her usual quota of wine and dinner parties, both in-house and out-.

At one point she decided she was interested in investing in, and becoming a part-owner of, an ice cream shop in Waltham called Lizzy's, whose owner was looking for a partner. Mary was all-in from the get-go, and volunteered to scoop ice cream from behind the counter to get a feel for the business. The owner then invited her to help out with one of his “hot fudge sundae parties,” and when Mary showed up she was surprised to be handed a cow costume, complete with a full set of rubber teats and a head covering with horns. That was apparently all part of the show for Lizzy's hot-fudge sundae parties, and Mary dived right in, scooping ice cream in her cow costume. The partnership deal with Lizzy's didn't work out, but that was not quite the end of that story. At the next school fundraising auction event, we, together with our next-door neighbors, offered up our own hot fudge sundae party, intending that it be served in ordinary clothing. But another neighbor – one, obviously, with a sense of humor -- offered to double his contribution if the four of us, we and our neighbors, served it up wearing cow costumes. We had no choice but to accept the dare. So we borrowed four cow costumes from Lizzy's, marched in to the party wearing them and doing our own take on break-dancing, all to the tune of “Wooly Bully.” You had to be there.

And one further brief sequel. At Mary's 50th birthday party several years later she was given a large pink Victoria's Secret box, with some suggestive remarks about what intimate apparel might be inside. With some trepidation in front of the birthday crowd, she opened the box to find, of course, a cow costume.

As the children grew old enough to require less hands-on attention, Mary decided to go back to work. She called a friend who worked in events management at EMC Corporation and said, "I have no experience in events management, but I think I was born to do it." She was entirely right, and her combination of energy, creativity, and industriousness kept her at EMC in events management, and later in the Office of the CTO working on EMC's Innovation Conferences and Centers for Excellence, for the last 10+ years of her working life.

For Mary, the post-retirement years were hardly occasion to slow down. She adapted easily to the "snowbird" lifestyle and the seasonal migration pattern between Massachusetts and Vero Beach, Florida. There were annual travels, usually to Western Europe, a new set of friends and dinner party partners in Vero, a killer bocce team, and more rounds of golf than you would expect for the levels of handicap we both carried. Mary being who she was, however, even all of that was not enough to satisfy her energy level, so she found a number of volunteer charitable activities in Vero. One season she worked as the chef/cook at a soup kitchen, responsible for putting out 75 meals for lunch with only a few volunteer helpers and a limited and catch-as-catch-can pantry of food items to work with. Last winter she served as a classroom mentor/tutor at the Dodgertown Elementary School helping 2d and 3d graders learn to read. She also worked with the Hibiscus Children's Center for abused or neglected children, and had volunteered to organize and help run their annual fundraising Gala this winter. And when the Ladies 9-Hole Golf Association was looking for its next President, it was Mary who raised her hand and was on tap to take over next season.

Those are merely some of the basic facts of Mary's life, but they fall far short of capturing the spirit, the energy, the enthusiastic and positive approach with which she took on whatever she set her mind to. It may be an overused expression to say someone would "light up the room," but Mary surely fit that description. She was a "people-pleaser," always tuned in to the needs and interests of those around her, and looking for ways to include them, to make them feel welcome and at ease. She operated at pretty much 78 rpm, which made for a comfortable balance with my own 33 1/3. She loved that she was once described as having the metabolism of a hummingbird, and so a painting of a flower being kissed by a hummingbird hangs in our dining room. It was sometimes not easy to keep up with her train of thought, which often veered off into free association, to the point that a coworker once said, "She speaks in hyperlink." She had a particular facility for remembering the details of other people's lives, what their children were doing, how many grandkids, even the color of people's eyes. She was also very proud of her knowledge of the pop music of the 1960's and '70's, and couldn't resist turning Sirius XM radio into a "Name That Tune" contest, even when I refused to play along.

There are many more descriptive adjectives that could be used in describing Mary by anyone who had met her. They would all be variations on positive, upbeat, energetic, delightful, and lovely. She was a young 72-year-old. She had so much more to give. The world is surely now a lesser place.