



WILLA ANNIS HENDERSON

5/7/1991 – 5/22/2022

Willa Henderson (she never much cared for her middle name, named after a great old friend of ours) came into our lives on June 13, 1991, exactly three years to the day since her older brother, Matt, had arrived via the same adoption agency.

Mary and I had been in the agency's holding pattern for the better part of two years, with no predictable end in sight, when the phone rang that morning and the woman who ran the agency told us we had two hours to get to the office to meet a six-week old baby girl, together with her birth-mother, Courtney, and Courtney's mother. That was truly a meeting unlike any other. We weren't at all sure whether this was merely an audition, that Courtney and her mom were just checking us out, perhaps had other candidates they also planned to meet, might even change their minds about the whole thing. But what started out as a somewhat awkward conversation gradually grew more comfortable, and eventually concluded on simultaneous sad and happy notes, as Courtney said her goodbyes to her baby, and we welcomed Willa into our family and brought her home with us.

We lived in the Auburndale part of Newton at the time, and shortly thereafter someone would move in to the neighborhood, just two doors away, who would become the most enduring and important friendship throughout the course of Willa's life. On the day before her 4th birthday party, Mary and Willa were out walking and bumped into another mother and daughter of the same age who had recently moved in and, over Willa's objection, Mary invited them to the party the next day. That little girl was Zoe, who became Willa's BFFL. The two of them immediately became inseparable, practically alter-egos of each other. In elementary school the teacher

complained that the two of them paid more attention to each other than to whatever was going on in the classroom, to the point that they were eventually separated into different classes. They – with the help of Zoe’s parents -- became famous in the neighborhood for their creative Halloween costumes, always a pair that would go together: an Oreo cookie and a glass of milk; a kitten and a little puppy; a pair of gift-wrapped Christmas presents.

Those childhood, pre-teen, and early teen years were a typical collection of happy times for Willa, usually with Zoe no more than arm’s-length away -- birthday parties, play dates, first-days-of-school, dance classes. But what she looked forward to the most were her summers at Camp Hawthorne, on Panther Pond in Raymond, Maine, which she and Zoe attended for a good handful of years. One year we arrived to pick her up at the end of the six-week session and she came running up in tears. We thought she was so happy to see us and eager to get home, but in fact it was quite the opposite. She was howling because she didn’t want to leave.

Willa was always a determined, even stubborn, child. From an early age she would often refuse to wear whatever outfit Mary had laid out for the day, insisting instead on her own choice. We sometimes wondered whether it had been a mistake to name her Willa, whether she might have been a more easy-going, less “willful” child if we had just named her something like Grace or Felicity. Mary would tell the story of the day, during one of their many head-knocking tests of wills, saying to Willa, “You think you always know what’s right,” and Willa retorting, “No, I just know what’s right for me.”

That spirit of determination ultimately saw Willa through an extended period of her life that can only be described as difficult. Beginning shortly after her 17th birthday, she developed what quickly became a very serious eating disorder, and in turn developed into depression, a variety of significant medical complications, and a series of other ramifications that was extremely troubling to us all. From that point on for pretty much the next dozen years, Willa’s life and ours consisted of a series of Emergency Room visits, in-patient hospital stays, medical treatment teams, counseling sessions, therapy of various sorts, specialized residential treatment programs, and almost every variation on those themes that you can imagine. There were, as you would expect, stresses on the family relationships all around.

Willa struggled with a whole litany of ailments, but at the center of it all seemed to be her own self-image, her inability, or at least difficulty, in recognizing and appreciating her own strengths and talents. She was very bright, although she wouldn’t believe it, and had a wonderful sense of humor. She had a facility for figuring out how things worked, how they fit together. She was always a very “busy” person, needing constant activity, sometimes satisfied by a sort of absent-minded worrying of the tail of her lifelong Beanie Baby sidekick, Zippy the cat. Many other times her energies required projects, from jigsaw puzzles to Lego kits – of which she had dozens – to crafts of all kinds.

One of Willa's greatest and most remarkable talents throughout her life, however, was her love for, and her ability to connect on a personal level with, young kids -- from newborns to toddlers to grade-schoolers to pre-teens. Whenever she saw a young child, whether one we knew or a complete stranger on an airplane or walking down the street, Willa's face would light up with the biggest, happiest smile. She was instantly and totally delighted to see them, which would immediately communicate to the kids, and Willa would have them laughing and playing in no time. We did actually have some early foreshadowing of this. In grade school one day the kids were asked to draw a picture of what they saw as their future lives as adults. Other kids drew big mansions, race cars, horses, baseball players. Willa drew a picture of herself in a house surrounded by babies, probably 30 or 40 of them. She was truly far and away the best I have ever seen at engaging with and caring for young children.

If there was a silver lining to be found in Willa's years of medical difficulties, it was the several strong friendships she made along the way, among both her treatment team of professionals and other young women dealing with similar issues. While Willa made friends easily, there were only a few with whom she was truly close, and she was fiercely loyal to them. Having common cause with others going through those same sorts of hard times created a strong and lasting bond that surely helped to sustain her through those times, and saw her finally reach a better place.

For she clearly did come to a better, happier, more self-contented place over the last two years of her life. The largest share of credit for that lies in two directions. In the Fall of 2020, through a DNA match via the website 23andMe, Willa connected with her birth-father, Rob. Rob and his entire family immediately and unreservedly welcomed Willa into their lives with open arms. They all visited together several times, both here in Massachusetts and in Michigan, where they live, and Willa bonded particularly closely with their two younger children. It seemed that having this missing piece in her life history finally filled in – and in such a positive and loving way – gave Willa a sense of contentment, perhaps completed the picture of her own identity.

And the second key piece that came into place was Willa's having met and begun a relationship with another young woman, one who was, for the first time in Willa's life, a "significant other." The two of them quickly became very important to each other, and among the many sad and tragic impacts of the accident that ended Willa's life is that their time together was so short – barely six months – and they were never given the chance to continue to grow that relationship, to enjoy the future plans they had already begun to make.

Willa's 31 years did not follow what you would call a normal life trajectory – at least not one that you would wish for your child. There was a too-long stretch of years that was plainly difficult, often both physically and emotionally painful and unpleasant, for her and for those who cared for her. That she finally seemed to have turned the corner, to have found a much happier place, to have become far more self-satisfied and at ease, at peace with herself, is both heart-breaking – that she lost the opportunity to continue along that positive path – and heart-warming, that she at least had those better times at the end. That big, beautiful, happy smile of hers – which we had begun to see more often – will be greatly missed.