

Making Friends
by Ginger Wolnik
June 11, 2015

My grandmother once told me that the worst thing about living long was outliving her friends. She spent her entire 92 years in the Chicago area, most of it in the adjacent suburb of Cicero. In her later years she would read the obituaries every day to look for a name she might recognize. She kept making new friends in her neighborhood and at church, although most were old and then they would die too. Her best friend for much of her life was Mrs. Deshada. I'm not sure how the name was spelled, but that was how she pronounced it. I remember meeting Mrs. Deshada when I was very young. She and my grandmother were both in their 60's at the time and Mrs. Deshada died a few years later. My grandmother talked about her the rest of her life.

Unlike my grandmother, I haven't had one best friend for much of my life. I'm not counting my spouse Karen, who is too special to consider just a friend, although she is also my friend. One of my problems is that I've moved a lot, both as a child and as a young adult. Another problem is that I've never made friends easily and many people I've known seem to have other people they've liked more than me. As a child and as an adult, I felt that many people would only talk to me if they had nothing better to do. Even today, some of my current friends seem to like spending more time with Karen than with me!

My first memory of having difficulty making friends was in kindergarten. During the very first recess, many of the other kids just started playing together while I stood and watched. I remember wondering how they could do that, since I knew they had all just met and couldn't have known each other before. For some reason, I was unable to just jump in and join them. I now suspect that extroverted people just start interacting with others and that introverts like myself are too shy to initiate contact. As I've grown older, I've had to learn to introduce myself, but still struggle with social skills.

I did develop one good friend during first and second grade when I lived in a rural area outside Orlando, Florida. Barbara was in my class and lived just a couple of blocks away. However, our houses were on opposite sides of a country highway that we were not allowed to cross. So, we would each stand on our side of the road to talk. The traffic was not busy, so there were long periods with no vehicles, but then a car or truck would zoom by and we would pause until the noise passed. Sometimes one of our parents would escort one of us across so we could play together. I remember watching TV at her house after school. But then we moved and I never saw her again.

I made more friends at that next house where I lived for four years during the mid 1960's. My best friends were two sisters, Susan and another Barbara, who lived behind us. We all went to the same school although we were all in different grades. My younger sister Michele also joined in playing with us. We often played with small model horses and we also pretended we were horses. Their mother had leukemia and was extremely thin and frail; I don't think there were any treatments for blood cancers then. They had a black housekeeper to help their mother and I remember the housekeeper baking things from scratch for all of us. We moved to Rochester, New York in 1967 but I tried to keep in touch with this Barbara by writing letters. Soon afterwards, their mother died and they moved to California. My family moved again after a year and we lost touch. I don't even know what part of California they moved to; they both probably got married and changed their names, so I've never been able to find them.

After several more moves where I never lived anywhere long enough to make real friends, my family moved permanently to Palatine, Illinois. I started high school and quickly made 2 good friends at school, Janet Rickert and Lynn Moran. We were drawn together because we all felt like unpopular outcasts. A few more nerdy misfits sometimes joined us; the only other name I remember now is Carla Bailey. My mother would occasionally drive me to Janet's house to hang out. For some reason, it was always easy for us to talk together and we became best friends.

When I started college, I had to work part time and no longer had time to hang out with my friends. Janet's parents got a messy divorce and her mother became very needy financially and emotionally, so Janet got a full time job and never went to college. Lynn resented her controlling father, so after graduating from high school, she got married in order to get out of the house. I found Lynn years later on the Classmates website and corresponded with her for a while by email and phone. Lynn's marriage did

not last long and she quickly found herself a single mom without an education; today she lives on disability in Colorado. She is now a very different person from the girl I knew in high school and I no longer feel we have a connection. Carla's family moved to a farm outside Lewistown, Illinois where both her parents, who were pharmacists, worked at a local drugstore. I spent a week at their farm one summer, but had terrible hay fever allergies the whole time and lost touch with Carla after that.

I kept in touch with Janet for a few years; we used to have long conversations on the phone even after I graduated from college and moved to Lexington, Kentucky. She lived with her mother and Janet seemed increasingly reclusive; her conversations became more paranoid and irrational. For example, on one visit back home, we went to see the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I enjoyed it as a science fiction fantasy, but was dismayed that Janet really believed the government was covering up the existence of UFOs. We frequently talked about her possibly visiting me, but she kept making excuses. I even offered to pay her way when she said she could not afford the trip. Then she stopped calling and writing, so I had to accept that she was not coming and I never really knew why. Since I never had good social skills, I was afraid that I had inadvertently offended her. However, she had put up with me for years, so I was hurt that she cut me off after being such a good friend for so long. She didn't seem to have any other friends and had never dated, so I figured she had become mentally ill. It has been 35 years now but I still think of her.

I commuted to college and was only on campus to attend classes, so I never made any friends there. However, I became friends with a married couple from my engineering graduating class after meeting them on my first job at IBM in Lexington, Kentucky. Greg and Marguerite Doyle recognized me from some of our college classes while we were at the new employee orientation meeting. I recognized Marguerite as she was one of the few other women engineers, but I had never spoken to her before. Since we were all new to Lexington, they invited me over to their house and to join them on various activities, such as my first backpacking trip. I only lived there for a year, but have kept in touch with them by exchanging Christmas cards and occasional phone calls. Greg has looked me up a couple of times during business trips to the Bay Area and I've emailed Marguerite on and off. It has always puzzled me why I have such a hard time making friends most of the time, but occasionally something just clicks with some people like them.

I next lived in Roanoke, Virginia for two years. It was a small, conservative town in the Appalachian Mountains. My co-workers were all older and married and I never made any real friends at work. I joined the Appalachian Trail hiking club, but on the easier hikes that I could barely do, I seemed to be the only one who was not retired. The same thing with the geology club and the camera club; I was in my early 20's and everyone else was much older and married. One exception was a woman in the camera club in her 30's, Jane Ambrose, who became a friend. She was a schoolteacher and always very busy, so except for camera club meetings, we rarely got together. However, I have kept in touch with her all these years by exchanging Christmas cards and occasional phone calls. Jane also flew out to California to visit with me the first year I lived here.

I moved to California in 1980 and my social life dramatically turned around. I joined a bicycle club and quickly made many friends that I still have today. I also made friends at work, as there were more single people my age there. I even became friends with a guy who lived next door to me; Silicon Valley was full of single, young adults with time for a life. When I eventually realized I was gay and got in a relationship, I inherited a new set of friends that came with my new partner, Karen. Some of my old friends even started doing things with just Karen; I've teased her that she was stealing my friends!

When I turned 50, I threw myself my first adult birthday party. Over 30 new and old friends attended. What I enjoyed most was seeing people talking to each other who had not met before and only had knowing me in common. It felt a little like the part of the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* where I could witness my impact on others.

I'm retired now and some of my California friends are starting to move away when they retire. However, I'm making new friends now that I have time to get involved in more activities. If I'm lucky enough to live as long as my grandmother did, I will probably outlive most of my friends. So in addition to staying connected with the many people I've known, I'm committed to making new friends as a life long enterprise.