



## Of a certain AGE

**Sue Stafford**  
Columnist

### The Unexpected Life

Growing up in the southwest hills of Portland, in an area that used to be the country, I was a child of nature. Animals, flower and vegetable gardens, and the “Hundred Acre Wood” behind our house provided hours of outdoor adventure to engage my vivid imagination. We were never without cats and dogs, and I even raised a baby raccoon to his full adult size.

Once I mastered riding a bike, I rode for miles on two-lane roads with little traffic. I also spent many happy days with my cousin in Hillsboro, riding her horses for long

distances in the very rural Tualatin Valley.

Portland was pretty provincial in those days – a great place to grow up. My intact nuclear family was part of a much larger extended family, 90 percent of whom also lived in Portland. The role modeling provided for me was to work hard in school, plan on going to college, and, because I was a girl, become a teacher or a nurse – until I got married and had a family. Of course, there would be grandchildren, and my husband and I would grow old together.

The mold started to show cracks when I was about 10 or 11, when I announced I wanted to marry a rancher and have five sons. At about the same time, my career dreams centered around veterinary medicine. I didn’t receive much encouragement for either path.

My individuality showed up in my choices of schools. My two older brothers had attended Lincoln High School in the Portland School District. I had another option with the opening of the new Sunset High School in the Beaverton district, so I chose Sunset over

Lincoln – rural and suburban over city kids. My first two quarters of college were at Portland State University and I lived at home, to be closer to a boyfriend who wasn’t a boyfriend by the beginning of fall quarter. I transferred that spring quarter to Oregon State University, not to the U of O where my brothers had studied.

I pledged a sorority at PSU but, when they found out I planned to transfer, they wouldn’t initiate me. I had always thought I would be part of the Greek experience and make life-long friends like my brothers had.

College is when my “expected life” really began to include the “unexpected.” With no sorority life, I lived in three different dorms and an apartment with different people every year. My social life was on the fringes of the action – a very different experience from being a big fish in a small pond in high school.

I went into college thinking I would be a high school English and journalism teacher. After three or four changes of major, I graduated with a degree in clothing and textiles with a business

minor, prepared to be a buyer for a retail store. Instead, I joined the National Teacher Corps, one of LBJ’s Great Society programs. I spent a year at Highland Elementary School in Portland’s Albina district. Then I moved on to training as a stewardess for Western Airlines.

The progression of my life from there has included many unexpecteds. My first husband died of a heart attack at age 39, after we were divorced. For 10 years, I was a full-time stepmother to four children, something never on my radar. That marriage ended in divorce. My greatest joys, the births of my two sons, have been followed by some very difficult periods in both their lives. It is those times that have provided the real-life education and skills needed to weather

the storms. Raising children is what rounded off my corners and vanquished my perfectionist tendencies.

I never expected to live in Seattle for 33 years, after moving there with my first husband. I did hope to live in Central Oregon at some point in my life, and 15 years ago I chose to make that a reality. It was with that move back to Oregon that I truly found home and peace.

Now, at age 75, I am entering that period of age-related challenges. A recent fall resulted in a broken nose (the first break of my life), which could have been so much worse. My doctor and I are working on reducing my blood pressure. The pain in my lower back is being helped by pain relief patches.

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