

Obituary

Winnie St. John

Our friend Winifred Amanda St. John passed peacefully in her sleep in her home in Sisters, on the morning of December 5. Her husband of 40 years, Jeff Omodt, and her two beloved greyhounds were at her side. It was a quiet conclusion to a five-year struggle with a degenerative brain disease. In addition to Jeff, Winnie is survived by two sisters, Valerie Durbin of Davis, California, and Pamela Zurer, of Silver Spring, Maryland.

Winnie grew up in Berkeley, California, and received a degree in elementary teaching from UC Berkeley. While she loved her five years of teaching second and fifth grades, she began to crave adult conversation too. So she returned to school at Cal and completed an MBA in finance. Off she went to her new career of accounting and finance in nearby Silicon Valley. From her start as a financial analyst, she moved quickly into supervision and management. Perhaps it was the natural teacher in her that made it so easy for her to manage and supervise others. “Everybody should have a boss like Winnie,” they all said.

After separating from a 12-year marriage, Winnie was all set to enjoy the single high life in Silicon Valley. But it was not to be: along came Jeff, also recently divorced. They met, dated for six weeks, and moved in together for what turned out to be 40 years. Asked how she knew Jeff was the one for her, Winnie always had a ready answer: “blue eyes, cute butt, all good.” And it was.

Setting up house together soon included the pitter patter of little feet — well, big feet. Winnie was taken by the rescue and adoption needs of former racing greyhounds. Adopting, advocating, and lobbying for their welfare became a passion for the rest of her life, and greyhounds became a part of the family from then on.

Spurred initially by Jeff’s business travel, it became their tradition to see how far they could go and visit in just two weeks of vacation every year. After seeing most of wonders of the world, their destinations began to shift to animal and wildlife journeys. Conservation, ecotourism, and awareness of wildlife’s plight became a new advocacy for Winnie. Among her favorites causes were elephants and giraffes.

As the allure of Silicon Valley faded, it was time for a career change. In 1993, Winnie and Jeff moved to Napa, California. Jeff became a college professor

teaching business and computer science and Winnie a controller for a world-renowned winery. Discovering that there actually could be too much of a good thing — fine food and the best wines — they decided it was time to retire.

After visiting friends in Eugene, Oregon, that looked like the place to go. They moved to Springfield with five fenced acres for the dogs to run. It seemed perfect at first, but wait, where did the sunshine go? With Springfield too gray and wet for Winnie, she needed one more move. Her sister Pam, a quilter, suggested they all visit the Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show. So, the sisters went to Sisters in July, 2007, and found 80 degrees, abundant sunshine, and streets filled with color: perfect!

It was love at first sight: A beautiful community with a welcoming and inclusive spirit. Let’s move! Winnie and Jeff decided. It didn’t take long before Winnie was involved and over-committed to some of the happiest work she’s ever enjoyed.

One of Winnie’s favorites was PEO, a women’s philanthropic educational organization. PEO women are dedicated to raising funds to support scholarships for deserving young women to pursue higher education. (Winnie’s mother was a PEO member who was delighted when Winnie joined the group, as did her sister Valerie.) Winnie jumped in to help form a new local chapter. In the process she made deep and lasting friendships with so many amazing new “sisters.” Many of the comments from those sisters talk about Winnie’s “natural ability to make everyone feel welcome, included, and listened to;” she was loved.

Another favorite connection was her beautiful friends at the Shepherd of the Hills church. She was constantly volunteering for everything, including several years as treasurer for the church

Always a teacher, she loved tutoring elementary kids who were struggling with reading skills. She was a favorite teacher because “she was also my friend,” her tutees said.

Throughout her life, Winnie was beloved for her compassion, intelligence, sense of humor, quick wit, and generosity. She brought passion to all she undertook.

In 2015, hiking with her greyhounds one day along the Metolius River, Winnie fell and sustained a serious



head injury. It was the beginning of a five-year degenerative disease that ultimately took her life. Before the impairment was too advanced, Winnie and Jeff were able to take their dream trip of a lifetime: a photo safari to go tent camping for two weeks off the grid on the Serengeti in Tanzania. It was a life-affirming experience.

Although that was to be the third and “final” Africa trip, it wasn’t long before talk of another “final” Africa trip arose — maybe just one more. Sadly, Winnie did not regain enough stamina to make another trip, but she did enjoy reliving the previous trip through the over 5,000 photos that Jeff took in just two weeks.

Winnie’s journey included a series of rescued ex-racing greyhounds. Each came with bad experiences and special needs, but each had an unlimited capacity to love and forgive. While these beautiful souls were here, she shared love, adventure, and travel with them until they could no longer manage. When they left us, so much richer, we were comforted by the legend of the “Rainbow Bridge.” It’s a place where animals go when they pass, to be restored to full health and to bound around happily waiting for their humans to join them. Winnie has a lifetime of 15 special greyhounds at the bridge now. She has gone to join them, to be restored from her infirmities and walk and run again with them all. How perfect is that? Life is very good!

The outpouring of love has been overwhelming. We need to get together to celebrate Winnie’s life well lived. But in the depths of winter, locked down, with COVID-19 abounding, now is not the time. But wait: Winnie’s sisters regularly make a family reunion visit in July and include the amazing Sisters Outdoor Quilt Show.

So that’s the plan, a celebration for Winnie in early July 2021. For quilters there will be a “Celebrating Winnie” quilt exhibit. (Start sewing your entry now.)

In lieu of flowers, a donation to an animal welfare organization would please her greatly. A local favorite of hers is the Furry Friends Foundation 541-797-4023, PO Box 1175, Sisters, OR 97759.



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