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WEEKEND BREAK

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Photos Courtesy Joan Herman

Herman, with her husband, John Gaasland, on an early iteration of the beach chariot in Newport 2014.

A Women’s March, a friend’s departure, a seat in public office, a beach-bound chariot ride and a high school reunion

By JOAN HERMAN
For The Daily Astorian

I love the change of seasons, particularly fall into winter. The darkest days of the year, rather than depress me, envelop me like a comforting cloak, encouraging me to reflect on the previous 12 months.

I marked my first full year living here since my return to Astoria in 2016. I underwent minor surgery. I was appointed to public office, the Astoria Planning Commission.

And I lost my dearest cat friend, my 17-year-old Himalayan-Siamese mix, Panda Bear. He was just two months old when he was handed over to my care in a shoe box outside the Columbia River Maritime Museum. Over the years, he and I had grown older and weaker together, I from multiple sclerosis, he from age and kidney disease.

I was Panda’s human, and as I progressed from needing no mobility aids to a cane, then a walker and, eventually, a wheelchair, he simply found new ways to snuggle up to me. He is greatly missed.

A few other experiences from 2017 stand out. Shortly after the year began, I joined some 1,300 other marchers on Jan. 21 for the Astoria Women’s March, one of thousands occurring simultaneously across the globe. In my younger, able-bodied days, I often spent weekends participating in one athletic event or another — whether 10K runs or long-distance bike rides. I was proud and especially grateful to be able to participate in a mass event once again, albeit this time in my cherry-red power wheelchair.

I have been using the chair since 2014 due to MS, but thanks to the Americans with Disabilities Act, which requires sidewalks to be wheelchair-accessible, I could easily navigate the entire route of

WILD AND PRECIOUS LIFE

Doesn't everything die
at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it
you plan to do
with your one wild
and precious life?"
— Mary Oliver, American poet

the Women’s March.

Ironically, Oregon’s famously public beaches are out of reach for most wheelchair users, unless they are in a vehicle. Personally, I hate the idea of driving a vehicle on the beach, and it’s not the same as being out in the elements with the wind blowing in my face anyway. That said, I am blessed to be married to a handy husband, who is often devising ways to help me participate in activities I would otherwise have to give up due to my disability. When John mentioned he wanted to attend the annual Corgi Beach Day, held in Cannon Beach in July, I told him to go without me, as I couldn’t get my chair on the sand. (I had not yet heard that Cannon Beach had purchased two beach-worthy wheelchairs.)

Not to be dissuaded, John devised what he calls the “beach chariot,” a simple contraption involving a lawn chair placed atop a plywood deck, with fat-tired wheels beneath it.

For the first time in three years, I was able to get on the beach, with John pulling the long aluminum

poles connected to the chariot, pedicab style. We may have gotten as many laughs as the throngs of happy little dogs romping about on that sunny July day.

One month later, and with some trepidation, I headed to my 40th high school reunion in Salem. I was painfully shy and unhappy in high school. It was not the best time of my life, to say the least. When I graduated high school, I pretty much closed the door on all but a very few friendships and gladly moved on to the next phase of my life.

But as I grow older and become more aware of my mortality, I also feel pulled to reconnect with people I have known in earlier stages.

I would be lying if said I wasn’t worried about how my former classmates would perceive my wheelchair-bound self. Would any of my small circle of friends be in attendance? Would the star quarterback who embarrassed me in the school hallway, one day so many years ago, also be present?

Yet I knew if I didn’t go, I would regret it. There are no redos for 40th reunions.

I am happy to report that I not only survived the event but had a good time. As soon as I rolled into the Salem Convention Center, where the reunion was held, several classmates I literally hadn’t seen since graduation in 1977 surrounded me, welcoming me with hugs.

And that high school jock I was worried about seeing? He had died of cancer three months earlier.

As I write these words four months later, on a surprisingly clear December day, I am reminded of a remarkable, once-in-a-lifetime moment last summer, when all of us stared up at the sky, united in childlike wonder at the sheer beauty and mystery of the universe.

I am grateful to be here still.



From left: Herman, Denise Moore, Josie Peper, Pat Bunness and Wendela Howie at the Astoria Women’s March in January 2017.



Herman views the eclipse from the Astoria Column in August 2017.



Herman with Panda Bear circa 2009