

3/24/98

When a new family moved in across the street, we were naturally interested in getting acquainted. George and Roland quickly checked them out and found that they had no boys with whom they could play. According to them, there was a “little” girl and a baby boy, along with the usual complement of parents, not exactly appealing to two pre-adolescents. Paul and I discovered that the new neighbors were young, that Stan Ingram was a banker, very quiet, and that Nancy was outgoing and highly verbal. Laurie, the toddler, and Edward, the baby, completed the family. As the summer progressed, the usual outdoor life made it easy for Nancy and I to become acquainted. We soon developed a casual relationship based on a daily cup of coffee at one house or the other. I assumed that we would never progress beyond that casual neighborhood acquaintance, since we were roughly the age of Nancy’s parents, and we began our relationship talking mostly in an exchange of information on daily activities. I wasn’t too sure that we had enough in common beyond our children to develop a real friendship, although because George and Roland were several years older than Laurie and Edward, Nancy frequently asked about parenting concerns. But, what did I know?

She was troubled by the Whitfields, a disorganized family next door to her with two little boys the same ages as the Ingram children. The older child, Paul, about Laurie’s age, had a fearsome temper and frequently defied his mother by running across the street in front of cars, once climbing a fence which gave him easy access to the Cadenhead’s roof next door. Several of us joined Norma in trying to coax Paul down from the roof. He taunted us by dancing just out of our reach and capering back and forth on the extreme edge of the roof. Norma finally got him down with a bribe. Nancy feared Norma’s children would be a bad influence on her two, but I had no clue how she could manage that situation, beyond carefully supervising the children when they played outside.

Nancy was an ardent church worker, balancing her parenting duties with her church chores. Once, she complained to me that one of her church leaders had accused her of “listening to the devil” when she cancelled a church appointment because of the illness of one of her children. Although I couldn’t give her any guidance on that problem, I did manage to express my doubt of any “devil’s” role in the incident.

When Laurie reached nursery school age, Nancy was very upset by the announcement from the director of the school that Laurie was in need of considerable help because she tested as severely learning disabled. It was a timely warning. Nancy and Stan took Laurie to some professionals, all of whom confirmed the director’s diagnosis. Nancy became a dedicated worker in controlling Laurie’s environment in order to control discordant notes. She simplified the furnishing of Laurie’s bedroom in order to minimize some of the problems of the learning disabled. I was able to help her in patterning Laurie’s exercise program to help her develop physical coordination.

Nancy was able to see some of the positive effects of Laurie’s disability. For instance, she would allow Laurie and Edward to visit other children on their side of the block so

long as they did not change their location without notifying her. Whereas Edward would take the initiative to visit other children, Laurie would dutifully come home to get permission to go on. Nancy kept an amazing balance in dealing with her concern about Laurie and her future, not smothering her with too much attention but being conscientious in providing the guidance she badly needed. She investigated schools and entered Laurie in ones that gave her what she needed without isolating her from other children.

After years of meeting over cups of coffee, Nancy and I had developed an amazingly close friendship that surmounted the great differences in our ages and in our fundamental outlooks on life. When we decided to move to Richmond for Paul to become Dean of Arts and Sciences at Virginia Commonwealth University, she was very much interested in our descriptions of the house we bought in Richmond, just as I was interested in her plans for the dream house she and Stan were planning. Nancy and I promised to continue our daily coffee hour by way of letters. Of course, we didn't, but we did manage to sustain a regular correspondence that kept us in touch.

Nancy kept me aware of the progress of Laurie and Edward in school as well as the progress in building their home. She was especially proud of her "ideal" kitchen, which had many blue accents despite her mother's insistence that kitchens were not the place for blue. Several times we had lengthy phone conversations about small problems in her life – usually, she just wanted to tell me how she was handling several situations, seldom asking advice, and of course we talked about my new life in Virginia.

After we'd been in Richmond for several years, Nancy wrote that she and Stan were planning a visit to his sister in Atlanta and wondered if they could fly up to see us while they were in the "neighborhood." Naturally, we were delighted, although visiting with Stanley would be a new experience for us. The visit was delightful. We showed them some of the sights of Richmond, and we all especially enjoyed the opportunity for Nancy and me to renew our friendship, with the added pleasure of getting better acquainted with Stan.

Every time I visited Dallas, Nancy and I spent some time together. We shared a cup of coffee in her charming blue kitchen. Once we visited Laurie in her dormitory at Dallas Baptist College, where she was making slow progress on an associate's degree in early childhood education. She eventually finished that degree, making possible her certification to teach in pre-kindergarten. She took some four years to finish a basic two-year course, but to the joy of her family she received her associate's degree the day before Edward graduated from Rice University with an engineering degree.

In the meantime, Nancy had the trauma of a mastectomy which she handled with remarkable aplomb. We continued our correspondence and our yearly visits in Dallas. The last time I saw Nancy, we had a prolonged lunch, talking mostly about the banking business, which was in disarray in Dallas. Over the years, Stan had become a vice president and survived several downsizings caused by his bank consolidating with other banks, but recently his position had been eliminated. Again, Nancy was upbeat; they would be able to survive while he sought work.

However, that was my last visit with Nancy. She did not tell me that her cancer had metastasized. She did not answer several letters I wrote throughout the fall. When Stan received our Christmas card, he called to say that Nancy had not survived a return of her cancer and a lengthy illness. Laurie had brought her fiancé to the hospital to see Nancy, who gave her approval of their marriage. Edward was already married and living in Houston. Nancy was not to see her daughter married, but Stan said Laurie and her new husband were happy. Two years later, we received a card signed by Stan and his new wife. The card was postmarked Terrell, Texas, but with no return address. I have not been able to track him down through any of the ways I've tried.

The absence of contact with anyone from the Ingram family leaves a considerable hole in my life, but I can cherish that unlikely but lovely friendship which developed and thrived for so many years.