

Ria's passing also served as a pretty stark reminder that I should waste no time in going where I still needed to go. The one trip which I'd spoken about for years but had never completed was a revisit to the Rhine River Valley. Grand Circle Cruises offered a "Great Rivers of Europe" cruise which sailed from Amsterdam to Vienna traversing the Rhine, Main and Danube rivers. This filled the bill perfectly and both of my sisters decided to join me!



We had two cabins. I roomed with Mary just as we had 70 years earlier as children, over the delicatessen.

And Pat of course roomed with her new husband Hal Bleyhl. Married in 2010, they were enjoying a late-in-life romance which was to be envied. And Hal made for fascinating company.



He was a real American hero having Captained LCIs (those infantry landing crafts) in the Pacific during World War II. Then he returned to active duty for the Korean War to Captain a ship which brought troops, and tanks into combat zones!

While serene views of the medieval architecture which dotted the riverbanks should probably be my prevailing memory from that 16-day voyage, it was all somewhat overshadowed by Mary having broken her arm in Amsterdam even before we'd left port.

Bringing Mary into Frankfort for a follow up X-ray was the only silver lining as it gave Pat and I a chance to revisit a town we'd both known so well. Pat took us by places that she remembered fondly from her time with the CIA. It was fun to compare notes!

Also memorable was our side-excursion into Bruges, Belgium.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site famous for its historic center of 13th & 14th century architecture which, having escaped bombing from the Germans in both World Wars, remains very much intact! I'd encourage everyone to see it.



To have celebrated my 80th birthday in settings such as these with my two sisters at my side was a pleasure and a privilege that I didn't take lightly. Though I've never had the sensation of living on 'borrowed' time, I've always realized it was precious.

2013 began with the loss of our dear friend, Barbara Wadler. We had lost Stuart just two years earlier. Barbara had been like a sister to Ria, and Stuart like a brother to me. Beyond the typical reflection and sadness felt during key passings like these, their loss felt almost existential to me, like a harbinger of things to come.

Here we are in happier times at a fundraiser for Congresswoman Susan Molinari of New York which Stuart had chaired through his Rotary Club on Long Island.



I remain in touch with their daughters, Julie, Ame, and Leslie.

As spring approached, I felt that I should make one final trip to Italy. The Fairways was organizing a cruise of the Adriatic Sea which a hundred of my neighbors had signed up for. No sooner had I purchased my ticket for that than Pat and Hal called to invite me along on a very similar cruise at about the same time. When I got a hold of my travel agent to exchange one cruise for the other, she informed me that both ships would be docked in Venice on the same day – one near the end of its route, the other at the beginning. I said, “Terrific. I’ll keep both reservations and sail back-to-back!”



This was my first time traveling as a ‘single’ third wheel. I was somewhat surprised to find that I was still a target for the ladies!

I didn’t allow myself to be picked off from the herd though since there was already one particular lady on the next cruise that I was interested in getting to know better, once I arrived in Venice.



Pat and Hal and I started off with a 3-day private tour of Rome before taking a car up to Florence for the day. Our ship left from Civitavecchia.



All of the papers and passes had been pre-arranged. I just walked across the dock, from the Princess to the Celebrity and sailed the route in reverse with my Fairways neighbors.

June Shoup had enjoyed a full career as an elementary school teacher before moving to The Fairways with her husband Gene in 2001. They had raised their two boys, Eric and Gary in Manalapan, New Jersey and after a life well-spent (both boys became engineers) they were eyeing a long and quiet retirement. The stress of Gene's executive position with the NJ Department of Transportation had manifested in a string of heart attacks but they had made it to the other side: a life of social events, family vacations, Atlantic City weekends, and cruises.

In fact, it was on the first night of a cruise in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean when Gene returned from the casino, announced to June that he'd had a very good night, stepped into their cabin bathroom, and suffered a massive and fatal heart attack. June spent her first few nights as a widow waiting to reach the Azores off the coast of Portugal. Eric met her there and they flew home with Gene's ashes which were scattered in a small ceremony at his favorite casino, Caesar's Palace in Atlantic City.

When one becomes a widower, the social structure has a way of compelling you to meet all of the widows in your community, but June stood out as fun, smart, well informed, and utterly stimulating.

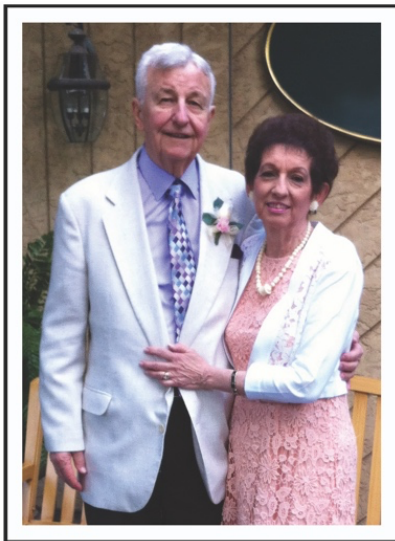
June and Gene lived on the next street over from us, but our paths had never crossed. Now she and I were in the same place (Gene had died just 17 days before Ria). Our first several dates were more like hanging out together at Sunday morning church, then sometimes followed by breakfast with her and one of her girlfriends. This cruise of the Adriatic Sea was where we first became a couple.



June is ten years younger than me and has both an energetic mind and personality. I needed this. And, as a schoolteacher, she has an extraordinary capacity for absorbing and distributing information. In one situation after another, this has put us at an advantage. She's always on, at the front of the line, with the proper forms and acting as her own best advocate.

(Society has a subtle, often unintentional way of overlooking the needs of seniors. It's been great to have June on my side!)

But the cruise ship is really where she's in her element. Frequent travel has afforded June all of the highest credentials and perks, so she knows the ropes as they say. We've taken countless trips together since that first one and it's been five-stars all the way!



They had been high school sweethearts at 17 but life sent them in different directions. They reconnected, and across distance and countless hurdles

brought their families together to the area where they grew up.

The following spring, June accompanied me to my niece's wedding which at the time may have seemed like a significant step but my family welcomed her and a new normal was set.

My niece Karen is Mary and Eddie Herrmann's daughter. Her marriage to Tony DeSantis is a heartwarming story.



Love always finds a way! Karen's brother Eddie offers another interesting example. His wife Cyd is a talented sculptor and very much a city mouse while Eddie is the ultimate woodsman. They have been happily married for years keeping a house upstate and an apartment in Chelsea – mainly coming together on weekends.



I can think of several marriages which would have benefitted greatly from this brand of wise self-knowledge!

Young Eddie Herrmann, Karen, Cyd, and Edward on a summer pub crawl in Greenwich Village.

Eddie and Karen are both to be acknowledged and commended for the superior care they provided to my sister Mary when her strength began to fail. Even going so far as to buy and renovate the house next to Karen's for their mother to live in! For this, they will always have the undying gratitude of my sister Pat and me. It was an uncommon effort.



Though I was still fairly strong for 81, I felt like it was time to figure out what my plan was. Those around me, even my kids, thought that my next move was premature, but I'd seen several of my contemporaries make the chancy decision to "age in place" rather than downsize while they still had the capacity to do so. Sometimes it worked out for everybody but too often their situations became cautionary tales. Anyway, I became determined not to leave the task of dismantling my life to my children in what would invariably be a time of stress and grief.

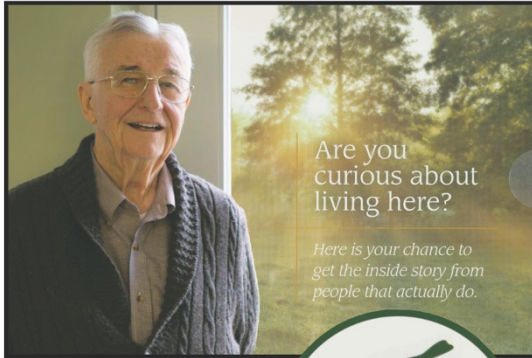
In one case, which I saw up-close and in slow motion, a good friend went into nursing care with his house still full of every possession he and his long-deceased wife had ever owned. I thought, "That is a ball of string that one should unravel for himself." So, preempting fate, I decided to sell the house and downsize to an apartment. But taking it one step further, I only considered living situations which offered graduated options for assisted living and continuing care.

I sold some of the obvious items like the silverware and dining room set. Pk's friend Mitchann was able to use some of the furniture which was great. And then whatever Pk didn't want was boxed up by Edward and donated to the vendors down at the Route 70 Flea Market where it was all scattered to the wind.

I have almost no relationship with possessions. There's never been anything in any of our homes that I couldn't have lived without. I've known guys who still had their army uniforms for instance. Whatever sentimentality I do have has never extended to objects. I've always felt that I could travel across the world with just my wallet and never be tempted to buy more than food.

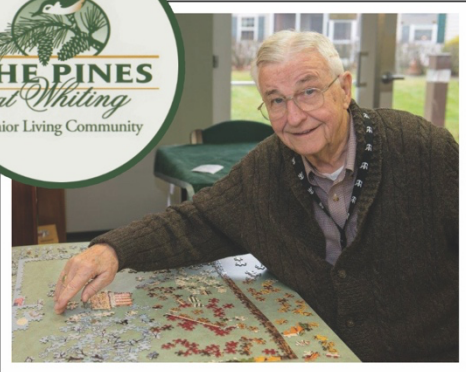
Growing up as I did with six people in a one-bedroom apartment must have formed this outlook. We just didn't have things. That coupled with the fact that luck has always been on my side. All throughout my life, whatever it was that we needed, I was able to provide. Or in some cases, it just magically showed up!

In October of 2013 I moved into The Pines at Whiting, not far from The Fairways. It was a Senior Living Community where I could live independently in my own 2-bedroom apartment yet opt into additional care services should I ever need them. I was near enough to June and all of my friends back at The Fairways. For me it was the perfect solution and from the beginning, I was totally impressed with their management, facilities, and staff.



In fact, when it became time for them to refresh their brochure, I became the poster child for the place!

Another setup from our photo shoot, though I'm fairly certain that I never worked on a puzzle during my time there.



I was still as active as ever. Perhaps a bit slower, but definitely on the move. June and I had our favorite restaurants, and then there was my Breakfast Club, plus I'd usually see Pk, Joe and the boys on the weekends. And if I was a bit tired, there were housekeepers, nurses, and an on-site restaurant. Little by little, those who'd questioned my decision started to see what I saw. That, for the price of rent, I now had a staff! And the equity from my house sale was working for me in the stock market.

It seemed that simpler times had finally returned, but during a call with my sister Pat the following summer she told me that they'd found a tiny nodule on her lung. In all likelihood, they said, it was nothing but that they'd keep an eye on it. In the meantime, Pat was far more focused on Hal's failing health and her own imminent knee replacement surgery.

Then, in the most severe back-to-back blows that I'd ever seen anyone withstand, Pat lost Hal to a brain tumor that November and by the following February her tiny nodule had grown to Stage 4 cancer. She was given just four to six months to live!

Pat's bicameral faith in God and American medicine allowed her to park her faith in both while she got on with the business of living! For her, this meant planning a great "Celebration of Life" party which was held that following May of 2015.



Pat at her "Life Party" with Brett and Pam.

Pat began an aggressive and experimental course of treatment under insurance which was afforded to her as the widow of a World War II veteran. Hopes were higher. Still, Pat and I began to make plans for "one last great vacation" together. Alaska!

Young Eddie Herrmann and Cyd would join us! Pk and Joe, and William and Aidan; Edward, Jen, and Sophie too! And Pam and Brian drove up to Seattle for the weekend to see us all off!

The terrain alongside Vancouver & Graham Islands was of a scale and beauty that I had never before seen.

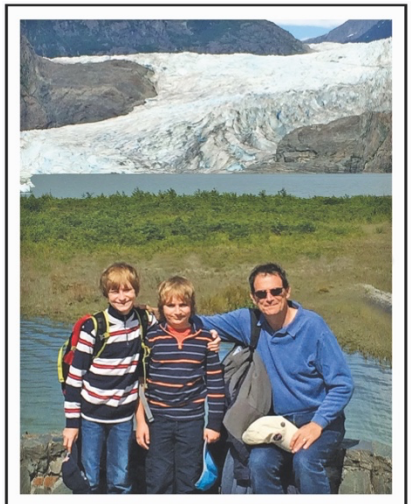
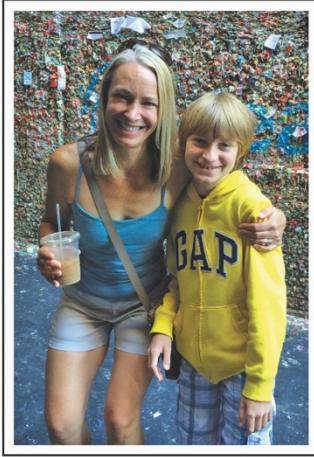
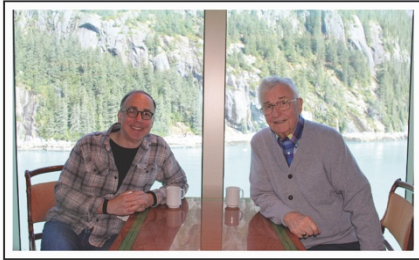


Pods of Orcas and Pacific Gray Whales chased our ship all the way to Juneau, and Sea Lions guarded every inlet of the Inside Passage.

To follow a thousand miles of coastline without seeing a city or a town (and barely a lighthouse or fishing boat) provides a sense of infinite majesty to the wilderness that's hard to encapsulate.



Though it should be said that all of this beauty and luxury was second to the larger point of spending time together as a family. Opportunities like these are rare and they must be aggressively planned for. And if it takes a spectacular backdrop to have everyone put their lives on 'pause' simultaneously, then I'm happy to use it. Making these trips happen has been a great joy!





Our day sailing into Glacier Bay National Park began at dawn. As we pushed deeper and deeper into the bay, the temperature dropped even as the sun came up until we came nose-to-nose with a floe which dwarfed our colossal ship!

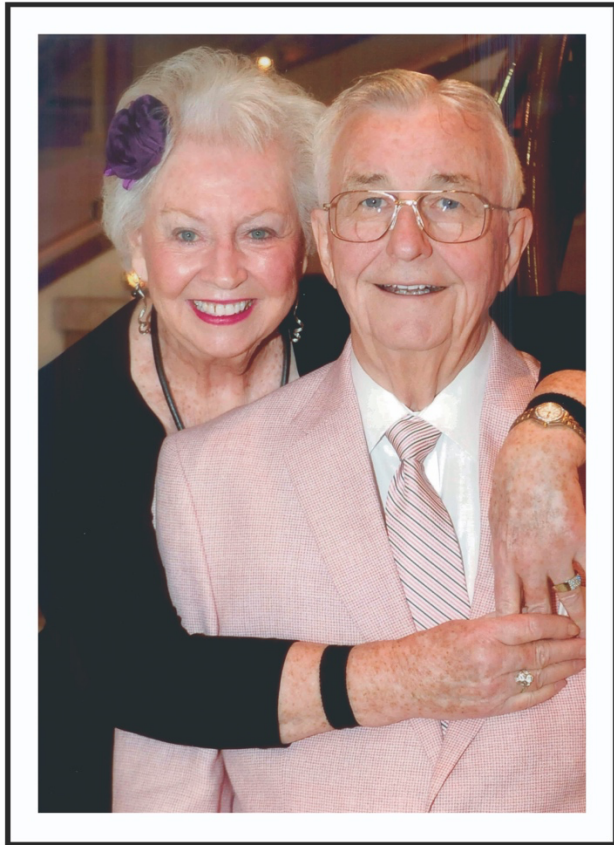
An equally big highlight was our rail excursion from Skagway, Alaska on The White Pass and Yukon Route. From these vintage coaches we enjoyed breathtaking panoramas of glaciers, gorges, and waterfalls. Through tunnels and over trestles we climbed to an elevation of 2,800 feet around hairpin turns and harrowing switchbacks, through places with names like Dead Horse Gulch, Tormented Valley, and Gold Rush Cemetery!



Here, passing over the Klondike Trail where so many thousands came to search for their fortunes in '98.



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And I'm happy to report that Pat didn't die after that cruise, or even after the next one, or the one after that (as you'll soon see). In fact, she's still with us! That highly experimental treatment began to work, slowly but surely. It was a tough road, but she ultimately received a PET scan showing her to be "miraculously cured" and her treatment was stopped. She continues to get a CT scan every three months but now – seven years on from her initial prognosis – Pat feels better than ever at age 91 (as of this first printing). It's a good thing too because I don't know what I would do without her. She has been a lifelong confidant and my most tireless cheerleader!

The next summer, June and I spent a week in Manhattan, taking a suite at the Marriot Marquis in Times Square. It was exciting to be back in the pulse of the Big Apple.



Here we are on 42nd Street where Edward and Donya's musical about Leonardo and Lisa was playing as part of the New York Musical Festival. We attended nearly all of the performances and scheduled meals and visits with family and friends who'd traveled in from near and far to see their show. What a great week it was!

That winter, June and I were off on another of our many cruises with Royal Caribbean. I honestly couldn't tell you where this particular ship was headed (other than San Juan) since I had long ago stopped getting off the boat. St. John's, St. Lucia, St. Maarten, St. Kitts – the souvenir shops all looked exactly the same. What I can tell you (with some agonizing specificity) is that this time the voyage was ten days long. I know this because I spent nearly every minute of it staring at the ceiling of our cabin as my accident took place on the first night of the cruise.

I had just come out of the shower and was drying myself off with one leg up on 'the john' when the ship lurched back ever-so-slightly to change gears. Being off balance, that was enough to send me flailing back towards the wall where I snapped my neck over a towel rack on the way down to the floor. I knew instantly that something was terribly wrong!

June rushed in and immediately called the onboard medical team. Two attendants wheeled me down to the X-ray suite where I was met by two doctors and a nurse. The calcium build-up around the cervical section of my spine was something that I was extremely familiar with (having suffered from its arthritis for many years) so I wasn't surprised at all when their imaging equipment wasn't powerful enough to see through it. Without evidence to confirm or deny anyone's suspicions, the ship's doctors pronounced that my neck was "not broken."

They offered to drop me off at one of the islands for further evaluation and/or care, but I just couldn't risk being waylaid in a foreign hospital system. June agreed and assured me that she could care for me aboard the ship until we could see our doctors back home. She rigged a belt as a pulley to help me in and out of bed (for the fifteen or so minutes that I was able to sit up every day). And she devised a fool-proof method for me to pee using a supply of jumbo-sized soda cups which she'd sourced from the Lido Deck. But most special of all was that she brought the dining room to me at every meal. Lobster tails, filet mignon – whatever was best of the evening's menu – along with a cocktail or a double Jameson's to aid me in a restful night's sleep.

My shoulders and neck were mostly frozen. And for several days sharp pain followed any pressure being placed on them in any direction. Using Skype and ship-to-shore we were able to communicate sporadically with my primary physician and the orthopedic group which she'd recommended. Would these nine days of my disciplined and stubborn stillness heal or hurt in the end? That was the question.

Back in Bayonne, the ship's crew wheeled me to a limousine which brought me directly to Ocean Medical in Brick, NJ where I was X-rayed again. At once, the orthopedist could see that my neck was broken and wanted to operate immediately.

This is where June really stepped up as my advocate. She found a young surgeon named Kris E. Radcliff who specialized in minimally invasive techniques at Rothman Orthopedics and brought him in to provide a second opinion. Dr. Radcliff had me fitted for a more substantial brace and said that we'd attempt to forgo surgery and just see how things progressed.



After weeks and months, plenty of setbacks and surprises, and some good old-fashioned patience, they suddenly announced that I could remove the brace. They even suggested that perhaps those nine days of stillness aboard the ship (plus the calcium build-up around my spine) had saved me from a very risky and painful surgery. And THAT is how you break your neck and still consider yourself lucky!