

Joanne

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When you're a scrawny weed of a nine-year-old with sticking-up hair and thick glasses, you're presented with plenty of opportunities to feel awkward and left out. For me, that age and condition came in 1962, which was fortunate because that was the year of the Century 21 Exhibition in Seattle. The World's Fair. And with the fair came my Uncle Johnny's family, all the way from Tee Hill Farm in Virginia.

Lots of relatives visited that summer and I had fun with each and all of them. But I especially enjoyed Wayne and Joanne, Uncle Johnny and Aunt Anne's kids, who were not only much older than me but somewhat exotic by virtue of coming from a place I could only hazily locate on a map (somewhere past the Cascades?). And of course, the accents which were richly flavored with Southern inflections.

Wayne was headed toward VMI that year and Joanne was in high school. I would have been in fourth grade and even my older sisters were still in elementary school, so Wayne and Joanne, as I thought of them became not just fun older cousins but symbols of the heights to which I might aspire. They were funny, smart and caring and not once did I feel unwelcome in their company.

The following year, our family made the trek to Wicomico, VA to return the visit. That trip and our time with the Virginia McDermotts remains one of my favorite childhood memories. Wayne was pretty busy but Joanne and her then-boyfriend Butch were the perfect hosts. And a perfect couple. We all pretty much knew Joanne and Butch would become Joanne and Butch and couldn't imagine one without the other.

I had lots of cousins on both sides of the family who lived on the West Coast, and California was where our annual vacations mostly took place. Meanwhile, Wayne went on to a career in the Air Force while Joanne and Butch built a farm and a family of their own. I didn't have a lot of contact with them but when I did, it was always a good time, even if the event that called us together was sad, such as when I went out for Wayne's memorial service a few years ago.

I remember when a colleague and I were out in Virginia on business and we had dinner with Joanne and Butch. All through dinner and on the way back to the hotel that night, Steve and I never stopped chuckling. They were a hoot and we were recalling stories from that evening for months after.

I wish we'd lived closer geographically and that my own daughters had more opportunity to get to know their cousin Joanne. She was one of the most caring human beings I've ever met and during my last visit I was very aware of how much her down to earth, simple caring was reflected in her adult sons. I remember watching as one of them took his nephew up in the cab of a huge tractor and let the boy 'drive' it under his watchful eye. It was just the sort of thing Joanne would have done. Did, for that skinny, nine-year-old me a half century ago who thrilled to have his older cousin seem glad to have him around.

Joanne was always eager to give everyone a place to stand. And she was thrilled to hear our stories and share her own. Tragically, her storytelling came to an end last week.

The world has lost a wonderful woman. And I thought you should know.