

Anne Willemann

By Dick Fiske

Anne was one of the good guys. Anne was energy. Anne was fun. A trip that Anne led was always a good time. "Where is Anne going next?" the coterie asks. Without waiting for the answer or the schedule or the cost they say, "Sign me up and here's my deposit." Didn't really matter where. It wasn't the trip, it was the leader. If Anne was going, that was good enough for us. She took us to new places, unexpected places, places with adventure; for the last couple of years in the summer and fall you didn't even have to bring your skis. The constant refrain was, "What's next?" Somehow it was always good.

Anne arrived in 1999 and quietly took the ski club by storm. Before long she was leading trips, elected to the Council, and taking the club in new directions. She wasn't pushy; she was simply a force of nature. Let's have pre- and post-trip extensions. Sure, and let's go to Prague or Ireland or Istanbul. And why waste the time between ski seasons? Let's go to Iceland, or Norway (and why not alternate buses and ferries, instead of sitting on a ship for a week?). How about 12 days in the Baltic on a small luxury cruise ship, visiting St. Petersburg and other exotic ports? How about Italy and the Dalmatian coast this spring on that same ship? And how about New Zealand next fall, arranged by Anne despite knowing that she would likely not go herself (but rather lead the trip lead in spirit)? Anne never quit.

Anne also never bothered with "if". She skipped right over "if" to her operative question of "how?" Many would-be naysayers were left in the dust of her passage. And often our question was a variant of that how, as in "How does she do it?" She spoke no foreign languages, but she was fluent in "people." In Istanbul we had some free time to roam the Topkapi palace and Anne was the last to arrive at our meeting place. But when she did she was at the head of a whole class of Turkish children who were also visiting the palace. All were laughing and shouting and having a grand time, with Anne as the Pied Piper at the center of the scrum, communicating on a much deeper level than mere language.

Anne was generosity. Everyone was welcome on her trips; and she ran trips to share her joy of adventure with others. She would be on the phone or badgering bus companies even as the folks on her trip were collapsing after a long day or an overnight flight, confirming the next day's activities or organizing some new adventure on the fly. But it wasn't just the ski club that benefited from her generous spirit. She was active in the Lord of Life Lutheran Church. She worked for Habitat for Humanity. And, essentially on her own, she sponsored an extended Kurdish refugee family for years, from the time they first arrived here. She taught them about America even as she learned about them, and took members of the family on trips with her to see and learn things they would never have had a chance to experience otherwise. Three of the girls were with Anne at the end. Anne gave of herself unstintingly.

Some memory snapshots that give a sense of Anne: An evening in Colorado years ago, all of us having sampled the local

vintages a bit too conscientiously, pushing Anne across an empty parking lot shortly after midnight as the sole passenger in a fortunately available shopping cart, and Anne laughing with glee. Dancing with Anne to a band from Prague in a bar/restaurant in Vienna, distaining the dance floor and gliding "gracefully" from booth to booth atop the backs of the bench seats. Anne arranging for a second visit to the Blue Lagoon in Iceland when our return flight was delayed; us travelers lounging in the warm water while she was on the phone arranging the complex and time-critical transfer between JFK and La Guardia in New York. Anne laughing in a blonde Valkyre wig, complete with helmet and horns, that covered her loss of hair caused by chemo. Anne, trailed across Europe by her faithful, dedicated and loving Sherpette, Marli, who toted her gear on Anne's trips and who cut short her own trip to accompany Anne back early from the Baltic. Anne with a grin that lit up the sky, on top of numberless ski slopes in Canada, the Rockies and Europe. And of course, Anne leading a group of 23 heretofore modest American women, nary a stitch of clothing among them, through the thousand year old baths in the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul.

Anne was first diagnosed with a tumor on her femur. Initially, she simply had to use care in walking, but the disease progressed. She sought both conventional and alternative cures and remained optimistic. She fought tenaciously, with all her will and energy, through surgery and radiation and chemotherapy, continuing to lead trips even as she had to stop skiing and progressed reluctantly from cane to wheel chair. Despite having to use a cane, she still walked one group into the ground in Dublin searching for just the right restaurant to end a perfect day. She led the Baltic cruise trip from her wheel chair, even as she had to return early from Tallinn to participate in an experimental NIH drug study that offered some hope. Eventually, with greatest reluctance, she moved from her apartment into the Greenspring retirement community in Springfield where she could have the support that she was increasingly coming to need.

Within a week after moving in, though, she acknowledged the wisdom of her decision and, Anne being Anne, was discussing potential improvements that could be made in the management and policies of Greenspring and exploring how, as a future member of the Resident's Council, she could bring these changes about. And after her passing I can imagine Management's surprise the following Sunday in the celestial staff meeting when, I have every confidence, Anne showed up as a newcomer with some modest suggestions as to how the running of the entire Heavenly operation could be improved.

In early May it was clear that things were not going well; her pain was increasing as the disease spread and her strength diminished. However, despite the increased medication it was also clear that, under the smothering blanket of morphine, Anne was still there, still tough, still strong in spirit. She was beaten, but not defeated, on Friday, May 27, surrounded by family and friends.

There is a little less light in the world with her passing, and a little less joy. She was more than fun and a friend. She taught us, by her generous example, how to get the most from the life that we have. Thank you, Anne, and God speed.