

LATE BLOOMER GUEST BLOG

By Letty Sustrin

I sat down in front of my computer to write about my life as a "Late Bloomer." Where do I begin? It's like taking a trip down memory lane. It started October 10, 1938 when my identical twin sister, Sheila, (deceased in 2015) and I were born. She was always my "Baby Sister" as I was born first, 20 minutes earlier. I think we must have had many private conversations while in mother's womb, and that's where we made the decision that we were going to be elementary school teachers.



By the time we were three years old we played "House" with our many dolls, and then, when we entered Kindergarten at age 4 and 1/2, our dolls became our students, and we were the "Twin Teachers." This pattern of teaching and helping others followed us through elementary school, junior high, high school and college. Having an uncle who was an educator, and then an administrator in the New York City School System, added to our love of schools and teaching. Meanwhile, as my parents were avid readers, books became a very important part of our lives.

I remember vividly when we were 4 years old, my parents would take Sheila and I to the Grand Army Plaza Library near Prospect Park in Brooklyn. We wanted our own library cards so my parents took us up to the desk and asked for applications for us to join. The librarian looked at this set of skinny twin sisters and asked us, "Can you write your name in script? We said "NO." She proceeded to tell my parents that they should bring us back when we could do this as printing our names was not acceptable. They needed a "legitimate" signature. We went home and practiced with mom every day, and the very next weekend found us back at the library, signing our names in script and getting our own library cards.



We continued to be very determined regarding the career we were going to pursue. After graduation from Brooklyn we started to look for teaching positions. Our family had moved from Brooklyn to Long Island. Meanwhile our degree was in Early Childhood so we wanted to teach on the primary level, specifically in Kindergarten. Fortune was with us, and the Brentwood School System was building many new schools. We went for an interview, and this very nice Principal spoke with us for a while, and said, "I think you two will be great teachers. If you'll take a chance with me, I'll take a chance and hire both of you to be Kindergarten teachers in the new school I will be opening."

Thus began 38 wonderful years teaching side-by-side in Brentwood. We taught Kindergarten for 18 years, and when the school was closed and renovated into a Freshman Center, we both became First Grade Teachers in another school in Brentwood. We were known as being a "Great Team", so we continued on with our career together. In 1978 when the first school closed, Sheila and I were chosen as "Brentwood's Teachers of the Year." This award is usually given to only one person. We were approached by our administrator and asked which one he should nominate. We told him, "We're a team! It's double or nothing." So he nominated us and we won! We never had any sibling rivalry or jealousy, and I thank my parents for bringing us up right.



We nurtured our students, and I like to think we were surrogate mothers to them as their own mothers had to work full time while they were in school. To this day I am still close to so many of our former students. After a certain age, they become your contemporaries and friends.

We retired in 1998 as the timing was perfect. It was a very hard decision to make, and we spent the whole summer at home crying and saying, "What did we do? Why did we retire? How are we going to spend the rest of our lives not teaching children?" It was a very traumatic time. So, in September we went back to our old school as volunteers to help the PTA and kids with various things. We had to keep this involvement.

My sister and I were always good in writing and were on the staffs of all the newspapers and school yearbooks of the schools we had attended. We spoke about this and about our love of always wanting to be authors. We seriously began to think of what we'd like to write about. And then, we realized, we loved teaching, we loved school, we loved kids - THAT'S

WHAT OUR LIVES WERE ALL ABOUT! Friends said, "You are too old to start writing. You need to travel and relax." No way! That was just not our style.

It was so easy to create a title. The first book was, "The Teacher Who Would Not Retire." We were very much into the intergenerational scene and wanted an older, traditional teacher. One that would take care of her students like we did. It took about 1 and 1/2 years to find a publisher (Blue Marlin Publications), and she was a small local company in Bay Shore. We now lived in Deer Park, so we were practically neighbors. Our main character, "Mrs. Belle" became our lucky charm. Children, educators, and seniors fell in love with her. The first book turned into a series with Mrs. Belle having many escapades with her former pupils. Sheila and I wrote the first 5 books together, and after she passed away, I wrote the 6th and final book of the series in her memory, "The Teacher Who Would Not Retire Retires!"

I thought my writing career would be over, but after Sheila passed away I began to find pennies wherever I went, and whenever I felt I needed her. I started collecting them. Then, one day I went to the cemetery to visit her grave, and as I turned away, there in the front of her grave was an old penny laying in the grass. I started to cry and went to my car. When I got home I called my cousin in Florida to tell her what happened. She said for me to write about it. I e-mailed my Publisher, and she was in full agreement that I should write the story. Thus, my new book, "A Penny From My Sister" was born.

I am very excited about this book. It's about a grandmother, whose twin sister passed away in childhood, and how the grandmother tells her two little grandchildren about how she would find pennies, and felt that it showed her that her sister was watching over her. It is a



sweet book, not sad, but it shows that “Memories are Forever.” With the tragedies due to the Covid-19 Virus, I hope my book will help the children and their families cope with their losses and remember their loved ones. I am currently a mentor for the Brentwood schools in a program created by Matilda Cuomo, mother of our New York Governor, Andrew Cuomo. We seniors in the group devote our time to working with children who need the attention of people who will give them confidence and show them how to follow a wonderful path of life. During the Covid-19 crisis I have been a Pen Pal with my 10 year old student so that he knows he is thought of and cared about. Life is truly still exciting and fruitful, even at age 81.

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