

Mary's name preceded her as a popular local columnist for the *Green Bay News Chronicle*, featuring her weekly commentary "Knock On Wood," which I, like so many others, always looked forward to reading. I first met her through a mutual friend back in the early 1980's. We both shared a love of café life, art and sociopolitical discourse, and we became instant friends. That friendship carried over into the professional realm as well. For example, when she needed a photographer for stringer assignments with the *Milwaukee Journal* or the *Chicago Tribune*, she would call me. I thoroughly enjoyed this arrangement. She was an award-winning journalist and I felt fortunate to work with her.

In 1985 Mary pulled up stakes and moved to Puerto Rico. She was living in Bayamon and I would get these wonderful letters telling me of the house she was building there on a lush hillside with a distant view of San Juan to the north. Mary was a prolific wordsmith of poetry, songs, journalism, essays and a letter writer extraordinaire, which is something she shares with her talented and "wonderful" cousin, Frances. Getting a letter from her made my week!

She loved the island and its people and she was to make it her home for nearly fifteen years. Eventually, she left her beautiful little house in the country and moved to San Juan, taking a job as a supplements editor with a publication called *Caribbean Business*. During this time she became good friends with the renowned photographic journalist Jack Delano and was instrumental in getting him to write his autobiography for the Smithsonian Institute Press. Delano, along with Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and a select group of other photographers, worked under Roy Stryker for the Farm Security Administration, documenting American life during the depression. Like Mary he was a transplant from the U.S., who had fallen in love with his adopted country. She encouraged me to come and visit, with the added incentive of meeting Jack. Sadly for me, I never had the privilege of meeting him, arriving in Puerto Rico shortly after his death. Upon my arrival, Mary presented me with a copy of his finished book *Photographic Memories* with a notation from her to me, saying "you, too, exemplify the philosophy of *amor al proximo*." It should be noted that Mr. Delano devoted a full-page tribute to Mary in his book, acknowledging that he could not have written it without her. This was Mary. Always a supporter of the creative process, encouraging me and others to pursue their passions. Her inspiration was ever present.

Staying with her when she lived in the city was particularly enjoyable because she had a great, third-story apartment in the center of Old San Juan that had vaulted ceilings, tiled floors and long arched windows with colored cut-glass above. On weekday mornings we would have coffee together in the central plaza before she walked to her new job at La Fortaleza, where she worked writing speeches and letters for the then

governor, Pedro Rossello. When she would return in the evening, we would go to the roof of her apartment overlooking the city and San Juan Bay and have a cigarette and a Corona, while we watched the magnificent sunset. Mary loved this after-work ritual.

On Saturday nights, she would take me to a large studio space for the weekly gathering of what was called “The Group.” This small panoply of accomplished painters, sculptors and writers welcomed me warmly (any friend of Mary’s was a friend of theirs) and we shared exciting evenings of discussion on a wide range of topics, from art to politics, and everything in between.

Always enthusiastic about Puerto Rico, she was a great guide taking me out of the city on weekends to visit all parts of the island. Our trips eventually cut into our funds and it was quite a stroke of good luck for us that one evening, while checking out a local band at The Cloister, a former nunnery that was converted to a casino-bar, we threw a few quarters into a slot machine and won \$40. Not your normal gamblers, we realized our good fortune and left immediately, with money in pocket. We used these funds for a day trip to the rain forest on the island’s east coast and stops at the beach and road-side food stands, where fresh coconut milk, papaya and oranges were standard fare. And, then the following weekend we planned another road trip, this time heading south, so we made our way back to the casino and dropped a few quarters into our lucky machine and presto, we won another \$40. The look on Mary’s face was worth the trip alone. We slipped out the door and skipped down the street giggling like school girls.

Mary cherished her visits back home to Green Bay as well. And whether enjoying the traditional Spanish fare of the island or the classic delicacies of home, she always appreciated the small joys of life. She had to have a Kroll’s burger, cheese curds and genuine-beef wieners. She would take Wisconsin home with her by filling her suitcase with some of these foodstuffs and more.

One thing that always stays with me is how Mary often talked about how much she loved her family, and they reciprocated, sharing a fondness for each other that was both touching and inspiring. I guess you could say another thing that attracted me to her were her siblings and parents—very cool and interesting folks, whose company I thoroughly enjoyed. They made me feel like part of the family. And I still do!

Ultimately, I consider myself very fortunate to have been a close friend of Mary’s. She was sincere, brilliant, prolific, funny, formidable and wonderful. I am still saddened by her passing and will continue to miss her for the rest of my life.

—Linda K. Van Beek

