



Susan Gottsegen
1945 – 2020

A Remembrance

I first saw my future wife Susan when she was a 15-year-old sophomore at Huntington High School on Long Island where we both lived. I was 16 and had started boarding school the previous year. I had gone to the high school to see some of my friends since my vacations were different than that of the public school's.

I remember Sue was standing at her locker, wearing a maroon skirt and white blouse, laughing at something someone had said. I thought to myself: she's really good looking and I've got to find a way to meet her.

It just so happened that I knew someone who was a friend of Sue's brother. A short time later, I was at her house, an introduction was made, and as they say, the rest is history.

Sue's mother wanted her to get out of Huntington High and, like some of her older sisters, go away to boarding school. Sue wanted nothing to do with that, so the compromise was that she would commute daily to a private school in New York City. The good news was that she was now on my vacation schedule, so we could hang out together while our friends were still in school.

I thought I was the luckiest guy in the world being with this great looking, fun girl who, for some reason, seemed to like me. And, I continued to feel that for the next 60 years. From the time we met until the day she died, there were no other girlfriends or boyfriends—just us.

I look back on that now and see it was quite remarkable because there were so many places along the way we could have drifted apart. Think about it—we literally grew up together: we went through adolescence together; stayed together through college; got married while I was in graduate school; became parents in our early 20s, literally children having children; experienced the proverbial empty nest and were happily growing older together.

Why do some marriages work and others don't? I have no idea. But maybe I can describe our relationship to explain why I think it lasted so long and was so happy.

First, we respected each other and never wanted the other one to be unhappy or get hurt. Arguments were rare and never lasted very long. No one had to be the winner or loser or automatically had the right answer. We listened to each other and always were willing to compromise; nothing was left to fester—we talked it through, made a decision, and moved on. I guess you could say we met young, fell in love, and stayed that way for 60 years.

Secondly, we liked doing things together.

When our two sons were young, we'd go on family trips. At Christmas and spring break, it was skiing, initially in New England and then out west to all the well-known spots—Sun Valley, Telluride, Steamboat, Taos, Alta, Aspen.

We also did other fun, family things. Rafting trips out west, as well as travels outside the US—Europe, Mexico, Bermuda, and the Caribbean come to mind.

A special one was sailing in the Mediterranean. We had chartered a beautiful sailboat—the Moon Beam—with good friends to sail from Rhodes along the Turkish coast. It was a great trip and we agreed with one of the other couples to charter the boat again the following year, this time bringing our children along. We sailed from Piraeus, the port of Athens, to Rhodes—south through the Greek islands. We all had a ball.

But soon the boys outgrew trips with mom and dad, and we had to find something else we liked to do together.

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Sue tolerated skiing, but didn't love it. I enjoyed it, but hated the cold, so we decided to look for another hobby. Tennis and golf were non-starters for her, but as a young girl, she rode and loved it. She had friends with horses in Bedford, New York, where we lived, and she decided to take it up again. She encouraged me to learn. I had never been on a horse before, so at the age of 47, I started taking lessons.

Sue and her friends were having a good time training for and entering local horse shows. That didn't have much appeal to me. I was more interested in riding cross country so I moved to a different barn nearby. Sue gave up showing and soon joined me there. Riding was something we both liked to do, and it was fun doing it together. We were of equal ability and confident riders—we could go fast, jump, and handle the horses when they were scared or threatened to get out of control.

For the next 25 years, we saw a lot of the world from the top of a horse. In the winter, we went to Central and South America because they were warm, in the same time zone, and easy to get to. Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, and Uruguay were some of our destinations—a couple of them multiple times. A memorable trek was with four other friends; a four-day ride through the lake district of Chile to Argentina. Our greatest crisis during the trip was running out of wine on the second day.

We also rode in Europe, and in 2019, on both the north and south islands of New Zealand. Sue also did “girls’ trips to Ireland, Tuscany, and Provence.

Our favorite activity, though, was participating in cross country events of 6–12 miles. What could be better than spending a beautiful Sunday in October and November riding in the Hudson Valley? It was fun galloping through the woods and the rolling farm land, and jumping over stone walls and natural obstacles. The events were typically over in one to one-and-a-half hours, then we cooled the horses and enjoyed a picnic lunch and bottle of wine. We both loved it and were pretty good at it; I recall we won three or four of the seven events we entered one year.

About five years ago, our horses were getting old and galloping through fields and jumping were not advisable for the horses or us. We had never been hurt before. We didn't want to break that record or any bones, so we retired our three horses.

It's pretty special to find something that you both like to do and get to do together. Importantly, we weren't competing against each other; we had to work as a team to be successful. I think it only strengthened the bond between us.

By our early to mid 40s, the kids had moved on and were working or were in school out west. We both had lots of energy and curiosity, and decided that as long as we had our good health, we were going to live life to its fullest. We just wanted to do things we enjoyed doing together and to have fun. And, we sure did.

It was easy to have fun with Sue. She was always happy, optimistic, and kind, never grumpy, gloomy or mean. She had a great, off-beat sense of humor, was totally transparent, and never pretentious. I think others appreciated her always positive attitude and liked to be around her too.

We both had the spirit of adventure and loved to travel to places off the beaten track—countries in Africa like Namibia, the Central African Republic, Mali, Botswana, and Zimbabwe; in Brazil—the Amazon, Pantanal and Bahia; in Chile—the Atacama desert in the north and Torres del Paine in the far south near Tierra del Fuego; in Asia—the stans (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan); the Arctic on a Russian icebreaker; Antarctica; Papua New Guinea; the Seychelles; and most recently to the Kimberley, the remote northwest coast of Australia. We always had fun, met new people, saw amazing birds and other animals, and learned about different cultures.

I take some comfort knowing that Sue died never having regained consciousness after suffering a COVID-induced heart attack and being placed on a ventilator. I was assured she felt no pain and was at peace. I certainly hope that was the case and deeply, deeply regret that I could not be with her at the end.

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I also take comfort in believing she lived a good, happy life. God knows, I certainly did with her. She loved her sons and adored her grandchildren and always looked forward to family gatherings with them and our many nieces and nephews. She especially enjoyed celebrating birthdays, anniversaries, and weddings as well as having dinners on our terrace in Pound Ridge with so many close, good friends.

In closing, let me get back to where I started: why did we stay together for so long? We respected each other; we listened to each other; we enjoyed each other's company; we liked making each other happy; we supported each other during the disappointments and celebrated the triumphs together; and we made each other laugh and had fun. I think that is a winning formula and it certainly worked for us for 60 years—each one filled with happiness, laughter, and love. For that, I am grateful, and I couldn't have asked for anything more.

Peter Gottsegen

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