Mary H.

Over the past year I have been fortunate to spend several hours each week with Mary H. I prepare her meals, do her laundry and help care for her dog while she amazes and inspires me with stories from her past. She will be ninety-two in just a few days, but thanks to photographs she has shared with me I can picture her in her youth. Her full head of soft curls was much darker then, and there were fewer wrinkles, but if you really look you can still see the strength and determination in her face and the sparkle of humor in her deep blue eyes. During my interview with her she was laying in bed, fully dressed in classically styled clothes and one of her favorite shades of lipstick. She had just spent three days in the hospital, but did not see that as a good excuse for sitting around in her pajamas and robe all day.

Mary was born in Moscow, Idaho in 1921. She was an only child to a father who managed their wheat farm and a mother who was a nurse working with the town doctor. From an early age she understood hard work and, although both parents worked to generate an income, what it was like to be poor. The work ethic she learned from her parents translated to being a good student in high school, but the cost of going to college was prohibitive. She was not one to sit around town and wait to see what was going to happen to her life, and she decided to start the nursing program at Sacred Heart. This decision required that she move away from home and complete courses at Gonzaga University. She excelled, but was forced to leave after 18 months of the three year program because she had become engaged to the man she loved. The nuns who ran the nursing program did not feel that a woman could balance marriage and working as a nurse, which seemed odd to Mary since she had watched her own Mother manage the two just fine. She was asked to return to the program after her wedding, but she declined.

Mary met Ray, the man who changed her life, and a dance pavilion in downtown Spokane. She was attending an event with other nursing students and students from Gonzaga, and although she was dating another guy she agreed to dance with Ray. That evening they danced only once and then did not see each other for a year. Their paths crossed again at the same dance pavilion, but this time Mary was single and was happy to be dancing with the young man who had made such an impression the first time they met. Their second meeting was in November of 1940 and they were married in June of 1941. Her plans of nursing school and working in the hospital become the life of a woman married to serviceman who was drafted near the end of WWII. They were fortunate not to be separated, and instead the young couple moved to army bases around the country.

In roughly 1945 Mary and Ray returned to Spokane and started a family; Caroline came along in 1946 and Marjorie in 1949. While she settled into the life of a wife and mother, Mary never lost her curiosity and sense of adventure. She had married a man who enjoyed having his wife at his side no matter what the occasion, including fishing vacations. While most men saw fishing trips as bonding time with male companions, Ray had his wife and two daughters baiting hooks and reeling in fish from local lakes and ocean excursions. The desire to fish in remote spots led Ray to learn to fly small aircraft and receive his private pilots’ license. Mary also earned her license, primarily so that she would be able to fly the aircraft if her husband became ill while they were in the air. She had never heard of Gloria Steinem, but she could fly a plane and catch a fish as well as any man.

When her husband started having problems with his heart, the fishing vacations turned into golfing vacations. Her daughters were encouraged to join them on their adventures, and one daughter still plays golf on a regular basis. Mary enjoys watching golf tournaments on television, and can tell you what it was like to play on many of the courses featured in championships. Sadly, her husband continued to have problems with his heart and was taken from her in 2004. With one daughter in California and one daughter here in Spokane she has spent the last 9 years splitting time between the two households. In 2004 she was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, and now it is much easier for her to stay in her home and let her daughters do the travelling.

Whether she was telling me about a boyfriend in high school or an exotic vacation Mary has always been humble. She knew that there were not too many women in the Spokane area, or even the Pacific Northwest, who were licensed to fly a plane in the early 1950’s, yet when she relates the story she makes it seem like it was simply the reasonable thing to do and not at all extraordinary. She and her husband were very active and could even be considered athletic, between downhill ski trips and time spent working with the ski patrol in the winter, fishing and golfing trips to a variety of locations and even being some of the first people to water ski in our local lakes.

Having spent time with this woman, hearing the stories of her life and the nonchalant way she talks about flying to a mountain lake for a weekend of fishing with her husband, or how difficult it is to hit a ball from the same green where we just watched Tiger Woods play, I am struck by the way that she has lived such a quietly inspirational life. In our society today we flock to role models who happily broadcast all of their achievements and would not know the first thing about humility. We look to pioneers who were noted as “first” to do something, but we never really get the chance to learn about the people who have quietly lived and extraordinary life. I can honestly say that, having met this woman, I am inspired to be quietly extraordinary.