

# Remembering Barbara

*Memories of Barbara (Sunde) Bernard, a loving wife and mother; a classmate and friend in the Valley City High School Class of 1961.*

by Dick Bernard

December, 2010

There is the oft-quoted biblical text, Ecclesiastes 3:1-15, which includes “a time to die.” This passage come to mind as I write these thoughts of a promising marriage that was all too brief and sad.

There seem to be *normal* times to die: one can die accidentally, as Barbara’s brother David did, in a car accident at age 19; or one can be killed in war or in some other circumstance; or you can succumb to illness, sometimes when very young; or you can live to a normal old age, which has its own variations. I’m a family historian, and in the olden days, getting to age 70 (my age) or 80 was quite an accomplishment. In recent years, most of the deaths in my circle seem to have been in their 60s, from assorted causes. It is noticeable, since they are younger than I am.

There was nothing normal when it came to Barbara’s dying at age 22 on July 24, 1965, and being severely ill for the two years preceding. There was no framework of reference for anyone. Such just wasn’t supposed to happen.

There are fragments of information that come back (I’m referring to nothing other than my memory as I write this).

Fairly recently, someone who knew Barbara mentioned that she had said that the doctors were amazed that her body was able to tolerate the levels of toxicity that she had had to tolerate, perhaps for a long time before the disease really manifested itself.

We’ll never know for sure, but after Barbara died, we did ask the doctors, and I recall someone saying that her kidney disease may have had its beginning from an untreated childhood illness which she got over, but which had attacked the kidneys. Until pregnancy she could cope fairly well.

In the Fall of 1963, Barbara took a teaching job at Sarles, N. Dak., up near the Canadian border. I was still in the Army, but I did get an early out and a

chance to teach in Hallock, Minn., perhaps a hundred miles away. It was an odd arrangement, but when you’re young and starting out, I think we both thought it was doable. She lived with a couple of older ladies in Sarles, and I came over on weekends.

I hadn’t been in Hallock more than two weeks when I took her to a doctor in nearby Canada. I recall she had an extremely elevated albumin level, and the doctor advised her she could no longer teach. This would have been in late October, 1963, and she was about five months pregnant.

She joined me in Hallock in a little upstairs apartment a block from the school where I taught.



*Dick, Tom and Barbara – the last family photo, taken sometime in 1964; probably at her mother’s home in Valley City.*

Right after the New Year holiday, 1964, I had to drive her in to St. Michael’s Hospital in Grand Forks, for complications due to the pregnancy. It turned out that she remained in the hospital until two weeks after our son Tom was born February 26, 1964. There was one instance where they discharged her to a motel room in Grand Forks for a few days, but that didn’t work out. Looking back, it seems like a foolish decision, but I don’t fault anybody. It was as it was.

She really never recovered. Barbara was always extremely weak; she couldn’t take care of Tommy. My sister Florence, then 19 and a freshman at NDSU, came and helped for a while. My parents gave much assistance, I believe. Ruth, Barbara’s mother, was by this time too disabled by arthritis to be of much assistance and Mike and David were still at home. I did as best as I could, given my job and my age and my lack of experience. There are no “playbooks” for these kinds of situations. You either cope or you don’t, and you can readily find examples of each. I would guess the record

would show that we coped!

I decided to take a new job in 1964-65 out in Elgin, N. Dak. The town had a small hospital (so did Hallock), and we could hope that health would improve.

In the summer of 1964 the three of us lived with my parents, two brothers and sister in the hutments at the University of North Dakota, where Mom was completing her degree, and Dad was going to school as well towards a Masters. I was broke, I worked as a waiter at night, and took a class or two at the U. Barbara couldn’t take care of Tommy, so we had to get a high school girl in Grand Forks as a babysitter. Nobody could understand why Barbara couldn’t take care of

Tommy, and I know Mom and my sister felt guilty for years about tending to think that Barbara was being lazy, rather than as desperately ill as she was. I understand.

Out at Elgin, Barbara recouped enough strength to substitute in the elementary school on a few brief occasions, but for virtually all of that year I had to take Tommy to a babysitter during the day. She just didn’t have the strength to cope with a youngster who turned one the year we were there.

There were many trips to Bismarck to Quain & Ramstad Clinic or to St. Alexius Hospital. On those

trips I occasionally stayed with the mother of one of my colleague teachers (whose daughter we were Baptismal sponsors for in 1965). Lee’s wife was a friend of Barbara, and taught in the elementary school. (I met them for the first time since 1965 this past summer. They live in Bismarck and are retired teachers.)

Tom was hospitalized with measles during this year in Elgin; we had a horrific three-day blizzard in February.

The end began near the end of the school year in May, 1965. I had taken Tom to the babysitter, and had to come back to our apartment because I’d forgotten something or other.

I came upstairs, and Barbara was lying in a coma on the floor, phone off the hook. She had been trying to call her physician, Dr. Pfeifle, in Bismarck. He was still on the line, so the incident must have just happened.

She needed to get to the hospital. I still don’t know how I did this, but I picked

her dead weight up, and carried her down the stairs and got her in the passenger seat of the car. She was unconscious, and as you likely know, it is nearly impossible to work with dead weight. But desperation brings out the reserves, I guess, and I managed.

She was transferred to Bismarck by ambulance, and I followed in the car.

At Bismarck they made the decision that she could not survive without dialysis and a new kidney, so she had to get to University Hospital in Minneapolis. In those years kidney transplants were new, and dialysis was done only in a few places.

We headed east on I-94 and somewhere between Bismarck and Jamestown my radiator hose blew. Luckily we could limp into an exit with a gas station and got the emergency repair.

At Valley City, the decision was made to have Barbara and her mother and brother David take the train to Minneapolis, and I drove separately. In Minneapolis we initially stayed at her cousins place.

Because we had no insurance, University Hospital people were very reluctant to admit Barbara but finally they did.

She spent the next two months in isolation, had a couple of major surgeries, and dialysis to help clean the blood.

I found pickup jobs and lived in a rooming house a mile or two from the hospital.

July 23, 1965, I went in to visit her and she was seeming fairly perky—she was in intensive care then after one of the surgeries—and she asked me to bring in some clothing.

The next day I came in to find her in a coma and near death. Either no one had called the rooming house, or they had neglected to tell me of the situation. She didn't regain consciousness.

She died late in the evening, and I remember going down to Western Union in Minneapolis to send a telegraph message to her relatives in California.

The next day, or perhaps the following, I left Minneapolis and drove by myself back to Valley City. Ruth, by then, was back home.

Peterson-Olson handled arrangements (Mr. Olson was a relative of Barbara).

I think the funeral was on July 29, 1965, at St. Catherines (it happens to have been on the same day that Medicare was signed into law). There were several Priests officiating. As you know she was Lutheran most of her life, and converted to Catholicism when we got married. No coercion on my part.

After the funeral, my family went down to the farm where my mother grew up, near Berlin, and had one of those sad

family reunions that happen at such time.

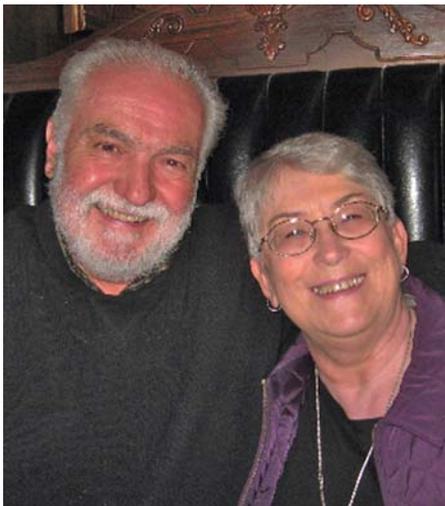
Then I proceeded back to Minneapolis where I had a new job (I signed the contract three days before she died), and took on the task of finding child care for Tom.

For the life of me, I remember nothing of that month between her funeral and the start of school, but I somehow survived.

In 1965-66, I lived in a rooming house in Anoka, and Tom lived with the landlords downstairs (I still keep in touch with them). I had to work a second job because I was so broke. In the fall of 1965 I met with an attorney to file bankruptcy to get out from under oppressive debts (3½ times my then annual salary), almost all medical related. I never had to do that because North Dakota Public Welfare came through and paid the largest bill, to the University of Minnesota. The rest I could handle over a lot of years.

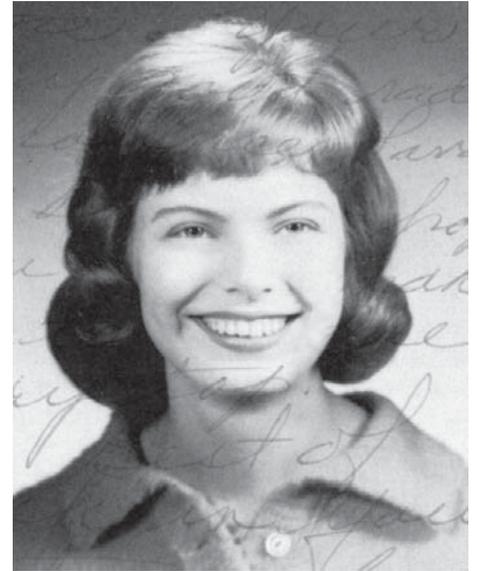
And life went on. – D. B.

*Photos are from Dick Bernard's family collection and published here with permission. I found it both emotionally difficult and yet very satisfying to produce this memoir of a dearly loved classmate. I can't thank Dick enough for the outstanding help he gave me and the many contributions he made to this project. He was wonderful to work with and, without him, this document would not have been possible. – Larry Gauper, 12/13/2010, www.Hiliners61.blogspot.com*



**2010:** Dick and his wife, Cathy, live in Woodbury, Minn., a St. Paul suburb. He retired ten years ago from a career in education. A member of the class of 1958 at Sykeston, N. Dak., High School, Dick went on to graduate from Valley City State Teachers College (now Valley City State University) in December, 1961, with a degree in education. Cathy is a lifelong St. Paulite, retiring from 3M after a long career with that company.

## From the weblog:



The above photo of Barbara—certainly one of the prettiest girls in our class—was part of a post on the Hiliners61 blog. It's from the 1961 *Sheyenne* yearbook. Why in the world we wrote across our senior photographs I'll never know (do they still do that?). However, in this case, some readers have commented they are glad to be able to see a bit of Barbara's very clear handwriting. It's good to have that sample, bringing back memories of our days with her in school. - L. G.

### Blog comment:

"I remember being with her in English and other classes. I was so jealous of her beautiful handwriting. She must have done wonders in the old penmanship classes. My picture is also written across. It is nice to have that small bit of writing to remember her by. She was beautiful!"  
—posted by **Dennis Gillund** (VCHS '61)



**2007:** Barbara's only granddaughter, **Lindsay**, 20, and her dad, **Tom Bernard**, then 43. Born in Grand Forks, on February 26, 1964, Tom has lived in the Denver, Colo., area with his wife, Jennifer, for the past 25 years.

# Barbara and Dick's wedding, June 8, 1963



(L-R) Ferd and Rosa Busch (Grandparents), Henry and Esther Bernard (Parents), **Dick and Barbara**, Mary Ann Bernard, Ruth and David Kent, Florence Bernard, Frank Bernard. My brother John, and Barbara's brother Mike were there but not in the picture.



(L-R) Frank Bernard, Robert H. Anderson, Ron Pinkney, **Dick and Barbara Bernard**, Florence Bernard, Shirley Udem, and Connie Cink

# FINAL PHOTO



**Above:** According to Dick: “This is the last photo of Barbara, taken in March, 1965, at New Leipzig, N. Dak., just four months before she died. We were serving as godparents that Sunday for a fellow teacher’s first child. Ironically, the Parish Priest (in the photo) had been at St. Catherine’s when I was going to college at Valley City State Teachers College. He was one of the priests who would officiate at Barbara’s funeral at St. Catherine’s in Valley City. Because of the extremely debilitating nature of kidney disease, she was extremely weak at the time this picture was taken.”



Barbara was named 1st Runner-up in the 1962 *Miss Valley City Pageant*. This photo is from that event.



Christmas, 1956: Barbara and a younger family member or relative.



Above photo likely taken around Christmas, 1957, in Valley City. Barbara (partially obscured) in back, her brothers Mike Lund and David Kent, with their Grandma Anderson (their mother Ruth’s, Mom.) Mrs. Anderson and her son lived on the hill near the present day North Dakota Winter Show building.



Christmas, 1956: Barbara’s brother, Mike, who passed away in 2007 at age 60.



Circa late 1950’s: **Barbara** with friend, **Sharon (Guertin) Auger** (VCHS ’61) “shooting themselves” in one of those photo booths that were popular at the time.