

From Susie Hunt '72

FB post May 30

I am starting with a blank document. I was given that choice.

My mind is not so blank. Anything but.

I am in the California desert. Surrounded by beauty and sun. Just the way she liked it.

I can feel the pain and loss of so many. It's a deep pain and a life changing moment.

I turned to Facebook this morning as I so often do. Mindless entertainment and a platform for sharing. I often indulge showcasing my travels and on occasion, an opinion or two. There are always certain people I hope will see and celebrate my adventures because they were the people who shaped my life and helped create the person I have become. One of those people was Toni Smith Wilson.

I had sent Toni a Happy Birthday wish on May 2nd with a note saying I would be in Buffalo the first week of June and would love to have dinner. I never heard back. I thought she might have written it off as a promise I may or may not keep, often due to a shifting schedule. I did not expect this morning to read of her death. None of us did.

I knew Toni when she was simply Toni Smith, a newly minted drama teacher taking on a crazy group of young women who had chosen the Buffalo Seminary for their high school education.

Whether Toni chose SEM or it chose her, no better match could have ever been made.

Toni and I were not that far away in age, but clearly she was the adult, I was the struggling teen, feebly attempting to grab hold of who I was, where I belonged, all of that baggage that comes with growing up. Instinctively Toni knew this. In her class I felt vulnerable, almost naked, nervous, and self-conscious. She would have nothing of it. In her passionate, sensitive way she pushed me outside my comfort zone, leotard and all. She was all about the improv and I couldn't have been more aware of myself when asked to perform. But I tried. We all did. Because we trusted Toni.

Once, she handed me a tiny book, perhaps two inches by two. She must have sensed an internal battle I was not aware I was waging, at least at the time. The book was entitled "A Friend is a Present You Give Yourself." She inscribed it "To Frank. If you ever feel like talking let me know. Love ya. Toni". I don't remember why she called me Frank. I do remember the gesture. I still have the book.

I drove around and walked around today and could not find anywhere to run. The thud and ache has been constant. I am so grateful to read the many memories of those students and friends who have posted on Facebook. So many reflected my own thoughts.

Toni made you feel you had a special place in her life and heart. What made her unique is that she bestowed that feeling on so many. And meant it. I was special. You were special. We all were. What a capacity for love. As a mentor, teacher, friend.

Back in my teens, we loved to chide her about Christopher Wilson, a man she met at Case Western Reserve. She shared with us that Chris was involved in theatre too and came from Maine. He arrived at Sem one day to help Toni with one of her many plays. He wore cowboy boots and was a tall drink of water. We all snickered. But there was no disguising the attraction between the two. They were in love. They married. They remain married. And that love gave them Sam, the very best of both.

Someone wrote today "I have known Toni Smith Wilson most of my life." I uttered those words hours before. You see, we all feel the same. We all share this grief, but we also share this gift.

I had the great privilege of delivering Buffalo Seminary's commencement speech years ago, a privilege I shared with Margaret Brown. There was much I had wanted to include in that address that never made it to the church that day. But one comment did. "My teachers at SEM knew me better than I knew myself." That comment was directed at Harry, Gary, and Toni and a handful of others who selfishly gave of themselves and challenged me to learn, to commit, to excel.

I drove by my storage space today to locate my yearbook. Instead I came upon a box and inside were my high school report cards. Back then they were hand written notes accompanied by a letter grade. Toni had given me

a B-. She said I embraced drama and was very good at it however she had to give me a lesser grade because I did not complete an important assignment.

Once again, Toni knows me. She continues to teach. I will do my best Toni to complete the assignment. I promise.

May we all join together today and share our love for Toni and take Chris and Sam into our hearts and hold them dear as she did.

With love to all who loved her dearly.

From Barbara Wolff-Reichert

FB post June 28

A month ago today, one of my very first Buffalo friends, Toni Smith Wilson lost her battle with cancer and both the world and I lost a special light. In the fall of 1995, coming home from my first day teaching physics at Buffalo Seminary, I informed my husband that I had met a charismatic drama teacher, who was going to be one of my best friends, she just didn't know it yet! Within a few months Toni and her husband Chris became part of the close fabric of our lives.

Toni brought passion, intelligence, and insight into everything she did, from teaching to friendship! I was awed watching public speaking students, without microphones, reciting tongue twisters in front of the entire school at morning meetings, loud and clear enough to be heard at the back of the 'chapel'. I was inspired by the way she empowered every member of the cast and production company of the plays she directed. I was fascinated by her analysis of the many plays we went to as part of her judging for the Arties. And I just plain enjoyed her ability to be both an intimate friend and an outrageous scamp.

Toni's passion came with a generosity of spirit for both students and friends, balancing her unconditional support with an expectation that you would live up to her high standards, and so we did. I know that for the rest of my life, every time I try something that seems intimidating, I will hear her admonition that to 'fail gloriously' is a step on the way to succeeding magnificently. She has 'left footprints on my heart' and I will always be grateful for the bitter sweetness that they conjure.