

“Ready for Wenham” by Barrie Levine

When I moved here in 2003, I wasn't quite ready for Wenham.

My husband Paul and I downsized to our ranch house on Essex Street, across from the main entrance to Penguin Hall, from our family homestead in Essex. On the same day that we passed papers, he turned on the ignition to his Kubota farm tractor and began to reshape the landscape, clear overgrown brush, take down trees to establish a vegetable garden, plant lilacs and hedges.

He unearthed boulders with his backhoe and created an impressive burn pit in the far corner of the property. During our first spring here, we delighted in the unexpected emergence of the many beautiful perennials tended by Mrs. Wurzel, the previous owner.

We both worked out of town. Paul “commuted” the four miles each way to his hairdressing salon in Beverly Farms. I drove six miles to my law office in Salem.

Our daughter Julianne at Brandeis, our son Max in rabbinical school, we had no children attending Wenham schools.

Our house was on the edge of town, near Gordon College on Route 22, a stretch of open road between Essex and Beverly, not a street in a cohesive neighborhood.

We didn't have a pet, so we didn't meet other dog-walking residents along the Wenham Canal. Our synagogue was in Gloucester, our circle of friends back in Essex.

Wenham was a home base to return to, but not our community.

Yet, we had enjoyed some special experiences here, as do many North Shore residents. When my daughter was young, we dressed up for the important growing-up ritual of mother-daughter tea and tiny cakes at the Wenham Teahouse. Or, we spent a Saturday morning at least once a year at the Wenham Museum, drawn in by the imaginative world of elaborately dressed Victorian dolls.

When my husband became ill early in 2012, my life became centered around full-time caregiving for him at home. When he died, sadly, at the end of 2013, I sought comfort in my family, making frequent trips to our daughter in New York City, visiting my cousins up and down the East Coast, and staying for a month with our son Max and his family in Israel.

Paul and I had been married for forty-one blessed years. I felt adrift in the deepest sense of the word, and it wouldn't have mattered where I lived. My first ten years in Wenham seemed like a journey from hope to sadness.

I woke up to the reality of change in my life by surveying the yard in the early spring of 2014 — my one level acre of Wenham earth, lawn, pine trees and oaks, blossoming lilacs, ancient stone border walls, and the neglected vegetable garden that my husband had roto-tilled and carefully planted in the past until he was no longer able.

Although I faced my new life alone, I felt strengthened and supported by the peace and healing effect of this beautiful natural setting that had given both of us so much pleasure. I began to find the courage to step into the life of the community that surrounded me.

Being a senior citizen, I am part of a ready-made affinity group — my peers on either side of my decade, on either side of town — with much in common. At first I took baby steps, seeking healing from loss at my own pace. I began chair yoga classes at the senior center (WCOA), the beginning of the process of meeting people one-on-one, one-by-one.

Jim Reynolds and his friendly assistant Kathy welcomed me warmly, just when I needed it most. In the summer, fresh garden vegetables for the taking filled planters at the entrance, a generous offering that reflects the true spirit of this place.

It felt safe to open my heart again.

I applied to the senior property tax write-off program and received an assignment in the town clerk's office. As part of my new role in municipal government, I attended the Citizens' Leadership Academy, learning from employees and volunteers about each and every town service, board, and department, even participating in a mock town meeting. I gained full confidence in and immense respect for everyone I met who makes Wenham a safe and neighborly place for all generations and walks of life. And, I want to give a shoutout to the crew on the federal side at the post office who know us by name and serve our town well.

Jim knows I enjoy writing and asked me to do a column for “The Wenhamite,” our monthly senior citizens newsletter. This opportunity to “speak” to Wenham seniors and get to know them — such interesting people with incredible life experience, talent, insight, values, and compassionate outlook — is a privilege that enriches this time in my life.

I am just beginning to appreciate how much I can thrive here.

It took a journey with a tentative start in 2003, then veered off in a direction that upended all of my life’s expectations. Finally, I can say with conviction — and gratitude — that Wenham is truly my home.

(851 Words)