

The Secret of Paradise

This is the story of most individuals when they fall in love, marry, and want to start a family. It was in the 1960s that my story began. When I graduated high school in Baltimore, Maryland, my major decision included being a teacher, or becoming a medical secretary. Tell you the truth, neither prospect excited me. Being that everyone was in the process of planning their life I resigned myself and the prospect of taking the next stage in my life.

The next stage had to be investigated so I looked at my grades, which were mediocre to say the least and realized I'm certainly was not heading for Harvard. After looking over by possibilities I came down with one that I probably would be able to get into. It was a small college in the Western Maryland hills, which in the winter had a lot of snow. It was very pretty, however, really interests me.

So after some thought I asked my parents to make an appointment to a small medical secretarial school in Western Maryland. It was really not earth shattering but included courses that definitely interested me. When I looked at that we had to give needles to our roommate or practice I must admit I got a little squeamish. But overlooking this minor setback it looked like the place for me.

Being an only child, I looked forward to meeting people and especially having roommates for the first time in my life. I met girls with ambitions similar to mine and some entirely different. Well, it looked as if this was the bridge I was searching for to help me cross into the next stage of development. Funny, as I got up early the .first day of classes I had no idea what was waiting for me. I made sure my uniform was put together adequately, my makeup was clean, and most of all my attitude was good.

As the months went by, much more quickly than I had anticipated I found myself facing another critical decision in my life. Each student had to complete an internship at hospitals located in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the District of Columbia. It was crystal clear that the best students with the highest GPA were offered the internships in

the District of Columbia. I was hoping to be able to land an internship in Washington, DC because I really didn't want to go back to my hometown but was not sure if I might be offered one in DC. To make a long story short when I had my meeting with the Director he informed me that my GPA was high enough to go to the Washington Hospital Center and wanted to know if I would accept the appointment. WOW. Not what I expected, however, I feel that this placement actually afforded me the opportunity to do my internship in Washington, DC but I preferred was smaller hospital. When I left his office I was floating on air and could not wait to get back to the dorm and share the news with my roommates. Needless to say, that was one of the happiest days we all spent together having achieved our goals which we had worked so long and hard for.

At the conclusion of my training, I interviewed for a job at the Naval Medical Center where I always wanted to work in. I always wanted to work at the Naval Medical Center so when I discovered there was an opening in the research institute I was really happy. To make a long story short, I was fortunate enough to get the job, however, little did I know that I would be leaving in the future join my husband on the island of Guam.

This tiny island would become our secret paradise. Unfortunately the secrets would be devastating...

I searched for employment and found a job the Naval Air station in Agana. At the time no one really knew the secrets held by the soil beneath the building which would become the Guam International Airport. It was these controversial secrets that enabled the illnesses to frame the rest of our lives.

My son John was born at the U.S. Naval Hospital on Guam on January 14, 1970. At the time I attributed his crying all the time to hereditary colic. Little did I know that this was a sign of severe autism which would affect our family for the rest of our lives. Locating both medical and behavioral assistance was a tremendous challenge in order to bring his self-injurious behavior under control.

My husband was the second one to be affected by contaminants such as agent orange. As time went by my husband came down with diabetes and numerous other medical conditions both associated with and not directly with diabetes. Being a physician, it is most difficult if not impossible to have him address this subject. I decided I wanted to go back to school and complete s dream I had always had. I decided to major and social work because it coincided with the work I had done with parents and children. Finally, I was ready to graduate in 2003. People wondered why I had waited so long to go back to school? It was because the majority of my time was spent at our home caring for our severely affected son, now adult with autism. As I was finishing up graduation odds and ends I suddenly felt my legs buckle and because of my illness diagnosed as Parkinsons I lost my

ability to walk. Since I was on my way to my internship at the VA Medical Center in Martinsburg West Virginia I had to purchase my ID. My friend and classmate would not let me leave as she secured me a wheelchair, and "Carol, get into the chair and I am taking you to your supervisor". You have worked hard and I won't let you quit now. As I rode down the hall with Patricia pushing me she said "well this is Carol the Traumatic Brain injury unit". As we approached the office I saw two people walking towards us. One was Tony, a staff person who I would be working with, and any other person was Charlie, a young nonverbal 23 year old and had fallen out of the truck and had brain damage. According to Tony, Charlie was the first patient with the characteristics they ever had. Needless to say, I knew this was where I needed to be. All the years with my nonverbal son had given me the strength to know their heart.

As the days went on and I heard people say to me can you please take Charlie's tray to his table because it's not in our job description? Keep in mind I was on a scooter and trying to balance my tray as well. I knew then much more training needed to be given to those surrounding Charlie in order for him to live and be able to function in our society.

Finally, my last function was to provide a roundtable to the men networking and communicating in the traumatic brain injury unit. I must admit this was a very sad time for me, however, I did not want the men to see it.... So I finished by asking the group "what do you like about the group and what did you not like about the group"? Fearing that I had left myself opened to criticism and took a deep breath and listened. Client "M" concluded with "well Carol what I

learned from you was to never give up". It took all of my strength to not cry. He said I saw you struggle to come in everyday and now I will be able to be like that.

In conclusion, my sincerest blessings and good wishes to all the veterans and special staff who want to see these wonderful people survive. It takes love, strength, fortitude and doing the right thing. One thing I learned is that the veterans deserve to be treated with respect and dignity and to be given the help they need through which their exposure to contaminants in the soil and water they have been exposed to. Does anyone have that right? Is this negligence or something more serious? What have we done to our children? We have an opportunity to help those who through no fault of their own became afflicted with serious health issues and right now will we turn our heads and walk away or at least take this god given chance to make things better for these families, Who have encountered their own Hurricane in the form of Agent Orange? Well, I know I want to sleep at night, what about you?

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I knew that it could not have been coincidental, rather there had to be a reason that three people became very ill in the same family, with illnesses that had no apparent causation.

