A Life Fully Lived

BY SYLVIA LINDMAN, FEN VOLUNTEER

Jan Harwood applied to the Exit Guide Program in the autumn of 2024. Before Jan exited this past summer, Sylvia Lindman spoke with her to learn a little bit about this feisty nonagenarian and her colorful life.

Jan exited life just as she had lived it—joyous, irreverent, and on her own terms. She was rich in the basics of happiness: close relationships, vitality, and a sense of adventure. "It was fun!" she said shortly before she died at age 93, in the beloved little house where she had lived for nearly thirty years.

She had been politically active for decades, beginning as a young mother in 1960s New Jersey growing ever more worried about the state of the world.

"We had three gorgeous, adorable kids, and I couldn't bear the idea of everything turning to rubble in one swoop," Jan said. "I had never paid much attention to the political world," but when friends introduced her to politics, "I began to write letters. We started an anti-nuclear committee, and to my surprise, a lot of people came out of the woods and joined us." During the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, Jan went to Washington, DC, to join a protest outside the White House. She picketed, marched, and wrote letters throughout her life. She was arrested at least nine times and briefly imprisoned twice.

Realizing they lived in the path of a potential nuclear strike on New York City, Jan and her then-husband Merrill decided to flee to the California Bay Area, his former home. While he pursued his art, Jan went to work as a typist. A complicated pregnancy led to a miscarriage, and the marriage ended too. "After I got over the trauma, I got myself a scholarship to Berkeley and went to social work school for two years," Jan said. Soon she got a job with Santa Clara County Mental Health.

Although her work was full of memorable experiences—such as counseling women prisoners and teaching sex education to housewives—her retirement years were her happiest. Jan settled in Santa Cruz, CA, where her daughter had attended college. "It was such a quaint town and had so much charm," she said. "I came to visit many times and knew this was my home."

It was there, in her pink, Spanish-style house with a flourishing garden, that she finally felt like herself. She was divorced; her three children were grown and settled. And, although she had loved her job, she was relieved to no longer feel responsible for so many other people's lives. She reveled in the freedom to pursue long-postponed interests: remodeling her house, gardening, painting, and writing.

Jan took writing classes from poet Ellen Bass and, with help and encouragement from friends, self-published three books—two murder mysteries and, just last year, a memoir titled *Patchwork: True Stories from My Life*.

Continuing her political activism, Jan co-founded the local chapter of the Raging Grannies, an offshoot of the Women's International League for Peace and Justice. "We were a chorus of singers," she said, "older women dressed up in old-timey clothes who sang political songs." Jan was their songwriter, setting satirical lyrics to familiar tunes. For example, "We're Sittin' on Top of the Bomb" is sung to the tune of "We're Sittin' on Top of the World."

Thanks in part to the Raging Grannies, Jan was something of a local legend. She gained new friends, opportunities to speak out for peace, and even something to write about. The grannies are the detectives in her two "Raging Grannies" murder mysteries.

Published in 2024, Jan's memoir was a culmination of sorts. Writing from various points of view, she relates candid stories about her marriage, her parents and children, her activism, and her work. While writing the mysteries came easily, *Patchwork* was hard. "The stories, because they are true, have caused me to have to think a lot more—and feel," she said.

She titled her memoir *Patchwork* because she thinks of it as a crazy quilt of her life. She had always saved scraps from shirts and dresses, and in retirement she used them to teach herself to quilt. "For some 20 years, my bright, imperfect, but lovingly crafted quilt, made entirely by hand, has brightened and warmed my bed, while reminding me that I am capable of careful, considered workmanship when I really try," she wrote.

"I felt like at 93 and 11/12, it was time to go," Jan said. "It took time, but [my family has] all come around to being supportive about my having a choice about how I go. I've been so fortunate in my health, but now I'm ready. I don't want to get sick and miserable. FEN has been a wonderful opportunity and helper—good, kind people."

After a life filled with adventures and love, her obituary concludes, "She will most certainly rest in peace."