Absent Friends

All my life I have been singularly fortunate in gaining and keeping friends. I have living friends now from all past phases of my life: childhood friends from Enid like Garlan Braithwaite of Dallas, undergraduate college friends like the former Seminole Nation Attorney General and retired Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, William Wantland, friends first met in graduate school like historian Seymour Drescher of Pittsburgh and the film maker George Allez of Madison, many colleagues and students from schools where I have taught, civil rights comrades, disability rights comrades, Socialist comrades, poetry reading comrades, traveling companions, neighbors, etc. I keep in touch with friends from all over the world by e-mail and snail mail. Every two weeks or so I write to a list that includes a retired Episcopal priest who was once my daughter's high school counselor and his musical wife, a retired Shakespearean scholar and his activist wife who helped me with my 1992 Socialist presidential campaign, my lifelong friend Don Yule of the New York City Opera and his son, my civil rights comrade Joanna Settle, and three former students. Naturally, over the years quite a few people who were close to me have died, some of them in the fullness of age, others tragically cut short. I want to celebrate just a few out of the many who are no longer with me except in thought.

Recently a high school student conducting an interview for a class project asked me about the person I remembered best from the civil rights movement. My wife and I answered in chorus "Idessa." Idessa Williams Redden was a dear friend from the first time I met her in 1965 shortly after the Selma to Montgomery march until her death in 2004 at the age of ninety-two. She headed the voter registration project of the Montgomery Improvement Association, Martin Luther King's original bus boycott organization, in 1965 and was already a civil rights veteran of long standing. She was tough. After her mother died when she was two years old and her father abandoned responsibility, she was raised by maternal grandparents who had living memories of having been slaves. She became a garment worker sewing shirts for the navy and married George Williams, a carpenter whose jobs depended on the approval of white construction bosses.

Idessa gained some economic independence by becoming a licensed beautician in 1949. The same year, on her fourth try before insulting registrars, she finally succeeded in becoming a registered voter, one of the few voting African Americans in Montgomery. When the Montgomery bus boycott began, she delivered people to work in her car every day and was an important part of a telephone "tree" network that kept the black Montgomery community informed of developments. Authorities eventually became reluctant to arrest her, fearing that her status in the community would make her a celebrity. She became a block captain for a voter registration drive begun by Rufus Lewis, coaching many people for the discriminatory literacy test imposed by authorities, and eventually became the citywide leader of the project.

When the climax of the Selma march brought unprecedented media attention to Montgomery, Idessa had an idea. Northern whites and blacks could operate in Montgomery encouraging voter registration with relative safety. She used her contacts to persuade a group of Chicago and Detroit area schoolteachers to come to Montgomery during their spring vacations. I was one of them. Others from the Chicago area included Mattie Hopkins who had tripled my reading speed during a short course in 1963 and who later became a member of the Chicago Board of Education, Ruth Shriman who was a comrade from Chicago Teachers for Integrated Schools which I had joined in 1962, three members of the Japanese American Citizens League including Gil Kimura who was twenty-three years old but looked much younger, and the Reverend Don Beisswinger who was one of the many good religious persons who worked easily in harness with this unbeliever. The Detroit contingent included a wonderful labor activist named Alex Lomako and Joanna Settle who became a good friend then and became a faithful correspondent nearly forty years later when she made contact with me after reading an interview with me in one of Studs Terkel's books.

Idessa found ways to use us that drew on our special strengths. I was Southern enough to have good manners in dealing with elderly ladies of all races. I coaxed several grandmotherly African Americans down to the court house to try to register when no one else could get them out of their houses. I was sent to get a small monetary contribution from a Miss Sayre on Sayre Street who appreciated the fact that I did not bombard her with questions about one of her relatives, Zelda Fitzgerald. I had a mouth on me and used

it to good purpose one night when the Carolina activist Golden Frinks and I harangued a crowd in the courtyard of a housing project after we had shown them my friend Stuart Hanisch's voter registration film *Count*. We did not get many new voters registered because every possible obstacle was put in our way by local officials. Applicants were routinely told that they had failed the required examination, including many whom Idessa and I had thoroughly coached and who probably did not make a single mistake. These failures were still useful, for civil rights organizations were gathering evidence to show that the proposed Voting Rights Act was needed.

We were followed everywhere by police, especially a Lieutenant Dumas, whose special charge was keeping an eye on both home-grown and outside agitators. He even attended the weekly mass meetings which had been going on ever since the bus boycott began in 1955 and even joined in singing some of the freedom songs at the churches of the Reverend Solomon Seay and the Reverend Jesse Douglas. He was a policeman doing the job he was supposed to do, but I gathered that he had some internal conflicts about it.

On our last full day in Montgomery we decided to distribute our voter registration pamphlets right in the heart of the downtown area. My preferred location would have been on the capitol steps where Jefferson Davis had been inaugurated in 1861, but that spot had been guarded since the Selma march by state troopers determined that neither Martin Luther King nor any other agitator would profane the sacred spot. I took the next best spot for a history teacher, a shirt store which had a plaque saying that a telegraph office had stood there on April 12, 1861, where Jefferson Davis had sent the telegram to General P. G. T. Beauregard to commence firing on Fort Sumter.

The current lessee at that location was prominent in the local White Citizens Council, then the leading segregationist organization. After Gil Kimura and I had been passing out pamphlets for half an hour, he came outside. "Everything was all right down here until you goddam outside agitators came to stir things up", he said. I replied that we were here at the invitation of Montgomery people and under their direction. Further, I had grown up in Oklahoma which had approximately the same racial laws as Alabama, that I had two uncles and six first cousins who were Alabamans with whom I was on excellent terms, so that I did not consider myself to be an outsider. He went back inside his store.

Half an hour later he came out again. This time he said “The whole goddam bunch of you ought to be put in concentration camps. Gil Kimura replied “It wouldn’t do any good. I was born in a concentration camp at the Santa Anita race track in 1942, and I am still here.” The man went back inside his store.

After another half hour he came out again. This time he did not try verbal argument but merely kicked me sharply in the shins several times before going back inside. This did not hurt very much and had an interesting effect on passers by. Several very nice white ladies deliberately asked for a pamphlet, hoping that I did not think the man’s behavior was typical of Montgomery or Alabama. I assured them that I had no such notion.

Idessa was pleased with our efforts and told us to come back any time. That August between the end of summer school and the beginning of the fall term I had some more free time to go south, and this time I could take my wife with me. We drove to Oklahoma where we left our two children, who were then aged six and three, with my parents who planned to take them to the Six Flags amusement park in Texas, then onto southern Alabama to visit relatives where we would pick the kids up after working in Montgomery. My wife Andrea and I drove straight through from Oklahoma to Alabama. When we drove through Mississippi where I had been arrested several times the previous summer I lay down in the back seat of the car and did not show myself until we were out of that state. Idessa welcomed us. Joanna Settle and her husband were just leaving, and she had work for us. The Voting Rights act had been passed but more evidence would be useful to get the federal registrars to come in.

Our first evening there some hooligan threw a pop bottle through Idessa’s front window. She tried to telephone the police, but the police had already tapped into her line and all she could get was the backchat from the police switchboard. She had to go next door to call. I had already bathed and was ready for bed, so I was in my pajamas when the police arrived. Idessa was a full generation older than me, but the police, including Lieutenant Dumas, had a notion that male Yankees came south mostly to have sex with black women, or even more forbidden sex objects. I had spent the last night before the end of the Selma to Montgomery march on the gym floor at St. Jude’s Catholic school on the edge of Montgomery, and hecklers on our way downtown the next day accused me of

having sex with the nuns who were also marching. I was extremely weary, and anyone who could deal with the pre-Vatican II habits that the nuns were still wearing was a better man than I am. The supposition implied by the looks I was getting from Dumas and his partner was equally ridiculous, but it remained until Andy came out and sat at the head of the stairs. At that point they realized that we were a more or less respectable couple and the tension eased. Of course they never made any serious effort to catch the bottle-throwing hooligan.

Andy was a great hit in Montgomery. She and Idessa bonded immediately, and she was assigned some teenage girls to help her with her registration work. We had a big line of waiting registrants at the court house every noon, most of them from a nearby laundry. Officials would let in only six registrants at a time and would not let in another group until all of the first six had completed their examination. The line would sometimes not move for twenty minutes. Andy started taking pictures of a clock and the unmoving line of registrants every five minutes. Officials noticed this and the line noticeably speeded up. One day Andy had no film in her camera but popped flash cubes anyhow and the line still speeded up. Once she found a puzzled old black lady in front of two drinking fountains where the "white" and "colored" signs had recently been removed. Andy told her it no longer mattered which fountain she used and was rewarded with a smile. We rather liked being in the court house because it was one of the few air conditioned places in Montgomery that were open to African Americans. Another was Morrison's Cafeteria, which had just changed its policy. We had a delightful lunch there with Idessa and Professor Jo Anne Robinson of Alabama State University, one of the instigators of the bus boycott.

Chris's Hot Dog Stand had not changed its policies, at least not toward outside agitators. When a black companion and I came in there for lunch, the proprietor said "I know the law says I've got to serve him, but I'll be damned if I'll serve you." This was a minor matter, but I made a complaint to the local office of the FBI who promised to talk to the proprietor. The next day Andy's teenage assistants went in to Chris's and took a booth. Andy came in a few minutes later and joined them. They were served with no trouble. It is very hard to make trouble for Andy when she goes into what we call her "Eleanor Roosevelt mode", which has cowed police and border crossing officials in all

parts of the world. Idessa kept me well fed with catfish and other regional delicacies when there were no barriers to be broken.

The best thing that Idessa arranged for us was a Sunday engagement in an unpainted church in North Montgomery, an area of unpaved streets where the clothes of white people were washed in tubs that sat over wood fires in most front yards. I testified for voter registration after the regular sermon. Unlike many so-called fundamentalists I actually read the Bible regularly and seldom have trouble finding a relevant text. I said that the Bible did indeed say that "In the sweat of thy brow thou shalt earn thy bread," but it does not require us to sweat to get another person's bread for him and that a good way to get out from under this burden is to gain political power by registering to vote. I was rewarded with "Amen" and other affirmations.

Toward the end of our time there we attended a rally at Alabama State College. It ended with a march for which Andy had made many of the signs, one of her most useful movement skills. She wanted to join the march, but Lieutenant Dumas feared for her safety. She marched anyhow. I had to stay behind to take home several elderly ladies. Dumas came up to me. "I have to say this," he said. "Your wife is a lady." It cost him something to say that, and I appreciated it.

Nobody ever knew the Montgomery community better than Idessa, and she used people like Andy and me to good effect. We traded stories all the time, and I got an intimate picture of the grass roots of a great social movement. We drove to Atmore, Alabama, to pick up our children. They were delighted to see us, especially our three year-old, but we found ourselves in an uncomfortable situation. My Alabama relatives were good people, but they were not yet prepared to hear of our adventures in a black community that we were just bursting to tell. We headed for home with our children as soon as possible.

In the spring of 1966 I returned to Alabama to spend a week with the Tuskegee Institute Community Education Project encouraging various local groups to set up a black history curriculum. Unfortunately, there was a conflict between the Tuskegee professors running the project and younger activists with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Despite my connections with the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer and with several Montgomery leaders the next county over, I was distrusted by

both factions. I visited several communities in the ten black belt counties that the project covered with good effect, but once I was misdirected, perhaps deliberately, and found myself lost at night in Lowndes County, the place where white activists Jonathan Daniels and Viola Liuzzo had been murdered by racists the previous year. Shortly after stopping to ask directions near the town of Fort Deposit I found myself being followed on a dirt road by a carload of white men who seemed to want to do me injury. I speeded up to about thirty-five miles per hour, jammed my stick shift into second gear, cramped my wheels, and spun around, reaching the interstate well ahead of my pursuers.

Idessa for the rest of her life loved to tell how frightened I looked when I reached her house in Montgomery less than an hour later. She restored me with whiskey and some of her own favorite scare stories. She told me that two of the young ladies with whom Andy had worked had been picked to integrate Sidney Lanier High School the next September where George Wallace's children went. They were used to white violence and had met some friendly older whites like Andy and me, but they were worried about how to tell when whites their own age were trying to be friendly. I told her I taught in a very integrated summer high school where the girls could enroll and that our family would welcome them as guests. Idessa also promised to set me up with a gig at a church in Elmore County on my way back to Chicago a couple of days later. The church ladies there fed me hush puppies and catfish until I almost burst and gave me even more wrapped in aluminum foil to eat on the way home.

The next month I met Idessa in Canton, Mississippi, on the final weekend of the Meredith march. There had been some bad violence from hecklers, and it was my turn to calm down Idessa. She was glad her two sixteen year-old helpers, Gladys Williams and Gloria German, would be safe in Chicago for the summer. As things turned out, they were not safe. Martin Luther King led open housing marches in Chicago that summer which provoked a violent reaction. Our white neighbors smashed the windows of our house, attempted to burn our garage and smashed the windshield on our car three times. Despite all that we had a great time. Andy taught the young ladies basic cooking and sewing skills, we attended cultural events frequently, and they did make friends with people their own age of all races. We decided that our interracial amity did not quite extend to the smell of hot combs and frying hair and persuaded the young ladies to make

a political statement by letting their hair go natural. When they got back to Montgomery, Idessa the hairdresser was displeased, although she eventually learned to make money with the new styles. Her husband George Williams, however, got less and less work as a carpenter because of his wife's activism, and they separated and later divorced.

In April, 1967, I went south as an active civil rights worker for the last time. My friend Robert Brudd and I stayed with Idessa but worked mostly in Autauga County up the road, occasionally crossing the Alabama River into Lowndes County, which was by now a somewhat less dangerous place, having benefited from a SNCC organizing drive led by Stokely Carmichael and others. There were still occasional incidents of violence, and I was arbitrarily arrested but let go without being charged, but it was obvious that local people like Idessa could handle their own problems without the help of show-boaters like me, which was precisely the result that I had hoped to achieve.

We stayed in touch. She married a retired school teacher named John Redden and became very close to his entire family, especially his grown son. She invited me back down to Montgomery for a conference celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the bus boycott in 1975. She could not pick me up at the airport, but I had ridden from Atlanta to Montgomery with Andrew Young, who kindly offered me a ride in the limousine that had been provided for him to Alabama State College where a meeting was being held. One of the other passengers was a black police lieutenant who was in charge of keeping an eye on distinguished visitors. I asked him what had happened to Lieutenant Dumas. He was no longer with the Montgomery police. He had had a mental crisis and started babbling in a foreign language that turned out to be the Acadian French that had been his first language as a boy in Maine, when he had been part of a group subject to great prejudice. After his recovery he had moved to Houston where he was reported to be working with the African American congresswoman Barbara Jordan. I have tried to trace him several times since then with no success.

Idessa saw to it that I met many people I had heard of but never met before like Rosa Parks, the leading Montgomery white activist of boycott days Virginia Durr, the pioneering Louisville activist Anne Braden, Martin Luther King Sr., and many others. I was privileged to spend much time with E. D. Nixon, the Pullman porter and NAACP leader who had worked for years preparing the ground for the bus boycott and who had

wonderful tales of how Dr. King had been selected to head the movement, ending with the line "We picked a number out of a hat and got Moses." Gladys Williams and Gloria German were doing well, Gladys as a department head in the same store where Rosa Parks had been a seamstress and Gloria as a secretary at a local soul music station. I modestly pushed my Socialist platform since I had been chosen as a vice-presidential candidate of that party. Idessa and I most enjoyed sitting in her kitchen and matching story with story.

In the late 1970s I met another veteran activist who lived in Montgomery: H. L. Mitchell, universally known as Mitch, who had organized the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) in Tyronza, Arkansas, in 1934, the first racially integrated agricultural labor union in the Deep South. This pioneering effort provoked much retaliatory violence but also some surprising successes. Mitch, an expert at garnering publicity, had persuaded the newsreel *The March of Time* to publicize his campaigns and had convinced his Socialist comrade Norman Thomas to aid him. The STFU's gains proved temporary, although there was some improvement in the conditions of both black and white tenant farmers, and Mitch moved on to pioneer the organizing of agricultural workers in California in organizations that became the predecessors of the United Farm Workers led by Cesar Chavez.

By the time I knew him Mitch was mostly engaged in keeping alive the memory of his earlier organizing work alive. He wrote a fine book titled *Mean Things Happening in This Land*, whose title came from one of the many fine songs written for the union by John L. Handcox. He invited me and other Socialists down to Memphis for the STFU's forty-eighth anniversary in 1982, celebrated then because Mitch was afraid that several key activists would not make it as far as the fiftieth anniversary. All sorts of labor leaders and historians were invited, including the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Mitch had hired a documentary film crew to record the proceedings. They photographed me talking with Schlesinger, but mostly shot me because they felt that my large and bearded presence had more visual impact than the deservedly celebrated Schlesinger. A couple of years later Mitch invited me to a Chicago showing of the film *Our Land, Too*, in which my scene-stealing is preserved.

Mitch lived in Montgomery with his second wife, who owned a restaurant that had not been among the first to integrate, and he had never met any of the black civil rights leaders of the 1950s and later. Andy and I resolved to correct that situation if we could. In 1989 we attended a family reunion with my surviving uncle and many of my cousins in Panama City, Florida. We called Gladys Williams and asked her to arrange a restaurant dinner on our way back so that Idessa and Mitch could meet. She did better than that. She used the cooking skills to which Andy had contributed to arrange a huge feast featuring barbecued ribs, corn on the cob, and much else at her brother's house. A woman currently serving on Montgomery's city council, a state legislator, and other celebrities were also invited. Mitch and Idessa hit it off as we had known they would. We traded stories for the fascinated young people like Gwen Patton of Trenholm Community College for hours and hours. Andy took pictures and mailed off copies to Idessa and Mitch after we returned home. The ones sent to Mitch came back saying that he had died at age eighty-three a few days after that last great evening.

Idessa continued to work for the community, arranging for mothers to enroll their children in Head Start programs and fighting the stubborn vestiges of injustice in her community. She officially retired in 1998 at the age of eighty-five, but she did not know how to quit being a community activist and never did quit that. She gathered an archive of her papers for Trenholm College. In 2002 I was invited to Montgomery for a slightly premature celebration of her ninetieth birthday. I had a new white Stetson hat that had been bought for me so that I could properly celebrate my oldest granddaughter Rosie Brisben's bat mitzvah. I took it off in Idessa's honor.

In 2004 Idessa died and Andy and I went down to Montgomery one more time to celebrate her life. St. Jude's church was full, the procession to the burial ground was long, and the collation afterwards was crowded. We were proud to be a small part of it.

I can claim to have known many of the great leaders of my time, but, when I am asked to name them, many people outside the disability rights movement do not recognize the name of someone whom I consider to be one of the very greatest: Wade Blank. I had my first serious conversation with him when we were in jail in Orlando, Florida in 1991. Our organization ADAPT, which originally stood for American Disabled for Accessible Public Transportation and after the passage of the Americans with

Disabilities Act in 1990 became American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today, had attempted to lobby a nursing home advocacy group at the Peabody Hotel in Orlando. We did not get past the front doors.

I was with Bob Kafka, ADAPT's publicity director who lives in Austin, Texas, but still retains a pronounced New Jersey accent. He had been instructing me on how to hold my cane when confronting the police: do not hold it by the grip and stick it straight out. That way the police can say that you were using it as a weapon and inflict severe retaliatory violence on you without getting into trouble. Hold the cane by the shaft and keep it pointing straight up and down. The Orlando police and the private security firm guarding the hotel had been studying tapes of ADAPT actions in other cities and recognized Bob Kafka. Although we were not yet on hotel property one of them said "We've got to get this one. He's one of the main actors," and arrested Kafka in his wheelchair. I held my cane in the approved nonviolent position and said in my best Lionel Barrymore voice "You can't send that boy to prison." I was arrested, too, my hands bound so tightly behind my back with plastic cuffs that I lost feeling in them. It did not come back until twenty minutes after they were cut off and the marks stayed on my wrists for a week.

It took the authorities eleven hours to process the seventy-five or so of us that they arrested. When they got to me, they said "Well, at least we can get this one into an upper bunk." I told them that would not be possible unless they provided me with a ladder and that I doubted if they could find anyone willing to take a lower bunk beneath a man weighing well over three hundred pounds. It was two in the morning before we were finally herded into a large holding area which was kept at fifty-five degrees Fahrenheit because the prison authorities had determined that this helped keep inmates under control. The temperature had been in the nineties when we were arrested, and I was in my shirt sleeves. I was given a very tight sweat shirt that had previously been worn by someone who had overindulged in strawberry flavored wine. I smelled bad, but my companion on the next bunk smelled worse. He was a paraplegic from Houston named Lee Sanders whose bowel program was neglected for the entire three days until our release. We told bad smell jokes to each other every time we met until his death in 2003.

This was my first arrest in the disability rights movement and by far and away the worst as far as our treatment was concerned. The American Health Care Association (AHCA) had decided that arresting all our leaders early in the action and treating us roughly would break the organization. They were wrong. The action by several hundred of our members continued even with seventy-five of us in jail and the television footage of cripples being violently arrested did not reflect well on the nursing home lobby. The police in an area that depends greatly on its convention business did its best to support AHCA, but the picture of a Denver woman in a wheelchair bleeding profusely from a scalp wound as she was arrested was not good for attracting tourists either. Most police do not feel good about arresting people with disabilities, in sharp contrast to those who arrested me for civil rights activities in the 1960s, and they have a great sympathy with our desire to stay out of nursing homes when it so much cheaper to provide attendant care at home.

I was there at the request of Dennis Schreiber, a deaf-blind friend in a wheelchair who could not get anyone to arrest him at the Peabody no matter how hard he tried. Dennis and I had known each other since the 1960s, and in 1982 he had persuaded my wife Andy and me to organize a caravan of multiply disabled people to go to Washington DC to lobby for what later became the ADA. That first trip was a near disaster in which we learned how painfully slow disabled people are to assemble, how long it takes them to take a toilet break, why it is inadvisable to put two totally deaf people in a room that they can lock, and much else. The next year when we were part of Coretta King's Twentieth Anniversary March on Washington for Jobs, Peace, and Freedom went much better and resulted in a good documentary film called *DARE* after Dennis's organization Disabled Americans Rally for Equality made by Michelle Weinberg. Dennis had invited me to several ADAPT actions, but I could not go because they were held during the school year. However, by October, 1991, I was retired from classroom teaching, had just been nominated as a presidential candidate by the Socialist Party, and felt that the Orlando action was a good way to start my campaign.

Much to the surprise of the police and the nursing home lobby, the demonstrations continued after the mass arrests of every leader who could be identified. We could not see or hear them, but we knew we had a constant group of well-wishers just outside the jail.

Although there was no attempt to invade the Peabody again, the convention center where AHCA was listening to such celebrities as Elizabeth Dole was constantly picketed. Disney World officials made contact with ADAPT, assuring us that great efforts had been made to make their facilities accessible to the disabled and that Peg Leg Pete, the villainous disabled cat who was Mickey Mouse's nemesis in the 1930s, had long since been retired. We were getting generally favorable local television coverage, and several of us had been interviewed by a New York *Times* reporter before our arrests on Sunday. Unfortunately, his story was not printed until Thursday and then in much-altered form because his editors thought the reporter had been co-opted by our group.

Everyone remarked on the discipline and good organization of ADAPT, most attributing it to the abilities of Wade Blank. Wade was a handsome man of fifty-one in 1991, who wore his blond hair long in the style of the early 1970s and who had no noticeable physical disability himself except for poor eyesight corrected by thick glasses. He had been born to middle-class parents in Pittsburgh, gone to an all-white high school, and then to a small Christian college, for "small Christians" as he liked to say, and then studied to become a Presbyterian minister. He took part in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery march after being challenged by a black friend, a radicalizing experience. After graduation he took a pulpit not far from Kent State University in Ohio. He allowed meetings of the Students for a Democratic Society there, and was fired after the Ohio National Guard killed four Kent State students in 1970. He took a master's degree at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago and was strongly influenced by theologian Shel Trapp, who had worked with community organizer Saul Alinsky.

The only job he could get after graduation was as an attendant at Heritage House, a Denver area nursing home. He was soon put in charge of the home's youth wing. Wade was a great fan of contemporary music, and bonded strongly with his charges after arranging for them to go to a Grateful Dead concert. He soon realized that the people in the nursing home, and not just the younger ones, were subject to the same oppression as other groups like blacks in our society. He became convinced that many of them did not belong in nursing homes at all, that many of them could live in their own homes with a little attendant care, much of which they could provide for each other. His efforts to get people out of the nursing home got him fired. Eventually the story of his efforts,

centering on the story of a dying young man whose social security check was illegally cashed by nursing home authorities, became a made for television movie, *When You Remember Me*, with Kevin Spacey playing the character based on Wade Blank.

Wade organized his liberated friends into the Atlantis Community in 1974, a member controlled group of disabled people living independently, with new members whom Wade and others managed to liberate from nursing homes swelling the membership frequently. A difficulty developed. Most Atlantis members could not easily get around the city to help each other, since municipal buses were not accessible to them. On June 5, 1978 Wade brought a group of nineteen people in wheelchairs to the intersection of Broadway and Colfax in Denver where they blockaded two city buses. The blockade lasted for two days before the city agreed to put lifts on all its buses. US Representative Patricia Schroeder distributed coffee and doughnuts to the group, and the blockade got favorable national publicity. The disabled community considers the blockade to be the equivalent of Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of the bus in 1955. In 1992 the city of Denver put a memorial plaque on the spot, but Wade insisted that only the names of his wheelchair comrades go on it and that his own name be left off.

Activists for the disabled in other cities began asking for advice in pressuring their own transportation officials, and ADAPT was organized by Wade and others to help them. ADAPT chapters were organized in thirty states and in Canada, Sweden, and England. After Wade assembled over a thousand activists in Washington in March of 1990 to force George H. W. Bush to listen to advisors like Evan Kemp and Justin Dart, the Americans with Disabilities Act, guaranteeing access to America's largest minority, was signed into law on June 26, 1990. This still did not free millions of Americans effectively imprisoned in nursing homes that ate up the largest percentage of Medicaid funds, so the fight went on with actions like the one where I met Wade in Orlando in 1991.

My usual tactic when jailed with comrades is to try to cheer everyone up by telling stories guaranteed to embarrass man or beast and reminding all that they are going to be very proud of this arrest in coming years. Those of us whose physical conditions permitted refused to eat, thus sparing us the embarrassment of defecating on rather public

aluminum stools. A group of sincere church people offered to get us daily newspapers. They told me that my request for the *Wall Street Journal* was the first one that they had ever received.

Wade Blank and I became very good friends over the next three days. When our release was announced, Wade was to be held behind. Lee Sanders and I refused to be moved unless Wade came out at the same time. We were tried by a judge who was not in the room but on closed circuit television. He could not smell us, which I think ought to be a part of due process of law. We were each fined $100 and forbidden to demonstrate again in Orlando for a year. Most of my fellow prisoners were indigent and could not pay the fine, but I did. We were greeted joyously by our comrades who had not been arrested and could still demonstrate, although a later court order prevented them from demonstrating at the convention center with a large cross with a wheelchair chained to it. I celebrated by doing something that my famished condition allowed me to do for the first time since I was a teenager. I got gloriously drunk on about four ounces of sour mash whiskey.

The next summer Andy & I routed a campaign swing through Denver and stayed overnight with Wade and his family. Wade's first marriage had broken up after he had lost his Ohio pulpit and found difficulty making a living, and a second marriage had not lasted long. He had met his wife Molly when she was trying to get her daughter Heather, who had spina bifida, mainstreamed into the Denver public schools. They fell in love and Wade enthusiastically adopted Heather, who proudly took the name Blank for the rest of her life. Wade and Molly had a son named Lincoln and a daughter named Caitlin. Like most children Lincoln loved to mimic his parents' activities and would play "rally" the way many children play "house". I recall him listening closely when Wade and I had breakfast at a neighborhood restaurant and traded stories. Wade had more and better stories than mine.

That fall in San Francisco I saw Wade for the last time. ADAPT had occupied Clinton headquarters and failed to occupy Bush headquarters only because it was totally inaccessible. AHCA was holding a convention at a local hotel. We blockaded the street outside it and were arrested and confined on one of San Francisco's numerous piers. I was afraid for a companion of mine, the bold Jimmy Schrode. The killer of Mayor

Moscone and gay city councilman Harvey Milk had gotten a light sentence because his lawyers convinced the jury that he was deranged due to the over-consumption of sweet pastries like Hostess Twinkies. Jimmy would lunge toward the police while ostentatiously chewing Twinkies. Jimmy was not hurt, and our confinement was short. I had reached my five year-old granddaughter by telephone in Chicago who was delighted to hear that I had been arrested again, as my family generally is because they know that someone is taking me seriously, and asked when she could join me having fun like that. She became a notable activist herself by the time she was in her mid-teens. Jimmy and his companion Eric von Schmetterling decided to celebrate the occasion by having Wade marry them at the ADAPT celebration that evening.

My Socialist campaign speech served as a warm-up act for the wedding. Eric wore a white dinner jacket and had a sign-language interpreter for the ceremony. Jimmy had found a length of white satin in which to drape his full figure and was delighted when I told him he resembled Maria Montez in the costume movies of my childhood. Wade was a model of eloquence and good humor. I was rather surprised that Irene Norwood, one of my Chicago comrades, a black West Side Baptist woman in a wheelchair who was always attended by one or more of her more than forty grandchildren, was obviously enjoying the ceremony, including its campy elements. I expressed surprise at this to Wade later. He said that gays and the disabled have something in common that no other groups have: they are frequently rejected by their own families. I looked forward to a long series of actions with Wade.

They never happened. Andy and I were in Florida in February, 1993, when we got the news that Wade and his son Lincoln had drowned off Todos Los Santos, Mexico. Wade had tried to save Lincoln from the undertow and failed to save either his son or himself. Andy and I stayed with Molly and Caitlin the next fall, and Molly and I participated in an ADAPT action in Nashville, Tennessee, while Andy attended a needlepointing seminar in Denver.

For many years Caitlin, who was five at the time of the tragedy, did not grow, and it took a struggle to get a medical insurance company to provide growth hormones. She never reached even a height of five feet and was troubled for a long time by her small stature, but she seems happy today. Molly was severed from Atlantis Community during

a factional struggle, but she has made a good life for herself with adequate financial support. When Andy and I last stayed with them in 2001, we asked what we could do for them. They asked to be taken on one of our annual Canadian theater excursions to the Shakespeare and Shaw festivals. We did that the next summer and had a great time. For the last few years I have missed ADAPT actions because I am now too crippled up to do much marching and yet not comfortable using the services of the generous volunteers that push wheelchairs at actions. My arrest total with ADAPT will probably remain at fourteen, but I hope other old timers are at the actions to tell heroic stories about Wade Blank and other pioneers.

People with disabilities tend to die sooner than other people, so I have lost many friends whom I first met on ADAPT actions. The one I miss most is Brenda Eldridge. I met her on an action in Washington in 1998. Mike Oxford of Kansas ADAPT asked me to help her. She was going to start on master's degree in social work at Kansas State University and was insecure because of her lack of general cultural knowledge. Mike knew that I was just full to overflowing with general cultural knowledge and loved to dispense it, especially when we were picketing, blockading, or occupying some headquarters of recalcitrant bureaucrats. That evening I took Brenda to dinner at a Mexican restaurant near where our group was staying. She was born with spina bifida, evidently a mild form of it, for she did not require a motorized chair until she became a mother when she was in her late teens. Her chair was one of those modeled on golf carts and, although she could not walk, she could transfer in and out of it fairly easily.

She was thirty-eight years old, just a bit younger than my daughter at the time, and very intelligent although very few people had ever told her that. She was from a poor background and had always been tracked into dead-end vocational programs in high school, since it was assumed that she would not live very long and would be institutionalized most of her life. She was not supposed to have a sex life either, but she did, and she had raised her son almost entirely by herself. She had not wanted to marry the boy's father. She had also managed to acquire an undergraduate college degree by bits and pieces with the encouragement of a few sympathetic teachers. She had never had much time to read for pleasure, listen to serious music, or go to museums. She was afraid that she would not fit into a graduate school milieu.

I had learned through many years of teaching that Brenda needed to be taught that she knew much more than she thought she did and that the things that most so-called educated people knew were fairly easily learned. We discussed Shakespeare and, as I had suspected, she had a pretty good knowledge of several of his major plays. She also had read some important novels, especially Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and she had understood that book thoroughly because people with disabilities tend to be invisible in the same way that Ellison said African Americans were. She was impressed that I had met Ellison, but I assured her that people who wrote books, even great books, were people not much different from us.

One of my poems had been published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and a year's subscription to that magazine had been part of my pay. The cover of the issue I had brought with me had a picture of the playwright Arthur Miller sitting in the ancient Greek theater at Epidaurus. Brenda knew that Miller had been married to Marilyn Monroe and was interested when I described *Death of a Salesman* and some of his other plays. I gave her my copy of the magazine and recommended that she get videotapes of some good productions of Miller's work from a library or rental store.

The next day ADAPT occupied some building by filling it with about six hundred wheelchair people and other varieties of the disabled. I forget which building it was, but our only way to counteract highly paid lobbyists was this sort of demonstration, which has a good record of working over the years. For several hours I was blocking a seldom-used entrance with Brenda, my friend Bill Scarborough from Austin, Texas, who died a few years later, and Henrietta Squires, a nurse from Michigan whose husband is a quadriplegic architect and designer. My poem in *Michigan Quarterly Review* had been written for Henrietta's husband Ward Squires. It was one of my "Cicerone" poems in which I guide friends through some important place. At Ward's request I had guided him through the Civil War battlefield at Antietam, and the poem had been well-received, provoking critical comment that read a lot more into the poem than I had consciously meant. Brenda said she would like a poem about the beginnings of things. Henrietta is a great poster artist like my wife Andy with a variety of interests and Bill was the person who first introduced me to the internet and a fellow Socialist, and we did a fair job of

convincing Brenda that she was able to accomplish any academic task she wanted to undertake.

About a month after I returned to Chicago, the poem *The Cicerone at Epidaurus* came to me. I imagined Brenda being carried to the upper seats in the ancient theater, which I had actually visited in 1985, and watching a performance of *Medea*. The poem was later published in *Disability Rag* and in David Kime's T*ranscendent Visions* and in my 2002 book *The Significance of the Frontier*. I wrote Brenda explaining a few of the references in it and suggesting some further reading. She absorbed knowledge like a sponge, which is always delightful to a teacher.

She started her graduate program and found it was not out of her depth, although, like most people in the social sciences, she was forced to master a great deal of useless jargon. In long telephone conversations Andy helped her with household problems and dealing with difficult relationships, for Brenda had proved by her survival that she was a very stubborn person. She was particularly interested in the problem of abused children, and I sent her a copy of pioneering essays on that subject by my comrade David Gil of Brandeis University. She joined my list of regular correspondents, and we helped her meet expenses with loans and small gifts. In late 2001 Andy and I were able to visit her on our way back from another ADAPT action in San Francisco.

Her husband Sam Eldridge had re-joined her by that time. He was a Vietnam veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, for which the Veteran's Administration refused to take responsibility because Sam had a bad paper discharge. He genuinely loved Brenda although he had a tendency to wander at times. He was working for Verizon then, but he soon found himself unable to report for work regularly. We accompanied them into Kansas City for some ribs at Arthur Bryant's place and a production of Shaw's *Major Barbara*, a favorite play of ours, at the Kansas City Repertory Theater.

Conditions soon got worse for the Eldridges. Brenda completed her degree but could not get a job commensurate with it. Further, she was regularly told that she was now "overqualified" for the kind of jobs she had once held. She had managed to alienate herself from many of the leaders of the local disability rights movement who could not get past her confrontational manner and intolerance of meaningless jargon to see her

genuine commitment to those who needed help. Her son D. J. Breedon was struggling to complete nurse's training and a college degree and had just come out as gay. Brenda supported him in this, but it added to her problems.

It did not take a rocket scientist to tell that Sam Eldridge was a good-natured but irresponsible badass of a type with whom I was intimately familiar from my Oklahoma upbringing, but we could not let Brenda go down the drain with him. They had emergencies again and again, and we lent them more and more money. Finally, we fronted a real estate deal for a modest house in Paxico, Kansas, so that Brenda would at least have a roof over her head. I became the owner of record. We tried twice to send them money so that they could get out from under their debt load, but somehow Sam could not get the bankruptcy done. When payments were missed on the Paxico house, I was harassed by the ruthless mortgage loan company, something that is highly disturbing to a man whose earliest memories are of the Depression. Sam eventually found a way to pay up, but Brenda's social security payments were minimal, and Sam could not get the payments to which he was entitled for traumas incurred during his military service.

Brenda developed intestinal blockages and had to be hospitalized. We cheered her up by telephone as best we could, but we could not be with her. It was almost like losing a daughter. She finally died on May 11, 2006, at the age of forty-five. I attended her memorial service in Akron, Ohio. Her son D. J. was there and his biological father, and Brenda's mother, and her sisters and their children and grandchildren. It had been a hard childhood environment to overcome. Sam Eldridge could not make it. A difficulty involving some disputed checks kept him from leaving Kansas, and he had alienated D. J. by straying during Brenda's last illness. Sam's daughter by a previous marriage, her husband, children, and various other connections live in the house in Paxico that I still officially own. So far the payments have been met regularly. Sam seems to have moved on. I am not sorry I lent the money. Brenda's last years were as comfortable as I could make them. She deserved better, but so do all of my disabled friends.

John Ford is the name of a favorite movie director, of an admirable Jacobean playwright, and also of the best student I ever had. One of the many things for which high school teachers are asked to volunteer without extra pay is in the training of new teachers. Sometimes this does not work out. Teaching can be learned only through practical

experience, but subject matter can be mastered beforehand, and many colleges do a very poor job of this. I have had to reject practice teachers who knew no more than the clichés of the text book or who had no idea why one historical fact might be more important than another. You have to love a subject to teach it well, and that love cannot be faked. Also, you have to respect students and avoid being angry because they come into the classroom knowing no more than they do. They do know a lot of things that have helped them survive to adolescence, sometimes in difficult circumstances. The teacher's job is to convince students that the subject matter is both useful and entertaining and to help students connect their new knowledge to things that they already know. Doing this properly requires a certain depth of self-knowledge on the part of the teacher.

Once I had a student teacher with excellent subject matter knowledge and a degree of organization that few people ever attain. Yet I felt she lacked something. Occasionally I would interrupt her orderly presentation with rowdy pranks that were also designed to teach some important point. She did not fluster easily and quickly got back to her orderly plan, but she seemed incapable of joining in the fun. I told her in the words of Nikos Kazantzakis' character Zorba : "You lack madness," but she did not seem to feel the need. I recommended the best possible grade for her. She began a brilliant career, soon became a principal and then a district superintendent. Emerging leaders in the community she served wanted more input into the local curriculum, and, instead of welcoming their interest, she insisted on the superiority of her well-organized ways. Community opposition to her became so great that she was promoted to a downtown post that did not involve interacting with a community, something that frequently happens to Chicago administrators who lack madness and fail at community relations.

John Ford did not lack madness. He came to me from Northern Illinois University in the late 1960s when ideas of revolt were filtering down to the high school level. From his first day he knew enough to react to a stupid or disruptive student question as if it were intelligent, to have some sympathy with students who came into the classroom full of almost uncontrollable rage. He had grown up in the Englewood neighborhood, not an easy place to achieve gentility even in the early years of the last century when James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan lived there even before blacks like John's family had moved in. John had been partially cocooned there by a loving grandmother, but he had learned to

observe and learned to connect. Like me he preferred to direct rage rather than waste time trying to stifle it.

He really knew his subject matter, too, and was anxious to learn more. I was always giving him lists of books to read. He loved new knowledge and would frequently begin a conversation by saying "Mr. Brisben, I was amazed." It took a long time for our relationship to evolve into one of equality where he felt comfortable calling me by my first name, but eventually it did. We would ride around the neighborhood together, and we would try to learn the dynamics of each block. I would always try to encourage student teachers to teach out of the depths of their own personality, but John expressed his personality with jokes and seeming digressions that were quite like mine. We also had in common that we were frequently on the edge of deep depression. We remained fast friends after his practice teaching was done, and we tried to help each other, but both of us had problems that were not easily handled.

Against my advice John joined the air force after graduating from college. He was the type who would try to crawl under the seat during violent movies. Also, anyone who could see through educational jargon as well as he could would also be able to see through military jargon, and John would not be able to conceal that insight. He began to freeze up when given orders that he knew he should not obey. He was given a general discharge on medical grounds in December, 1968. He was at loose ends, so Andy and I invited him to stay at our house. He wore dark glasses all the time although it was the depth of winter and was physically afraid to go back to his old neighborhood.

At the time I was in far worse shape than John and needed him much worse than he needed me. I had been sliding into a constantly deepening depression and needed to be hospitalized. I recall watching Richard Nixon's January, 1969, inaugural in the common room of a hospital while waiting for an electroshock treatment. Andy says that John managed to go to my school and clean up my paperwork for the end of that semester. The shocks have fuzzed out much of my memory of that time. John's presence at our house allowed Andy to visit me in the evening much more often than she otherwise would have. John visited me, too. Within a few weeks I had decided that I did not want to spend the rest of my life in an institution. John helped me rebuild my mind, and I helped to rebuild his. My ability to make the odd connections that had been the basis of the poetry I had

started writing a few years before was temporarily gone, but everything else seemed to be there. Within three months I was back teaching my classes. I was more than a little shaky, but I could function. John began working in a bank and eventually teaching in a grade school and building an emotional life of his own.

Andy and I have always been of the opinion that everyone ought to be married like us, and we were delighted when John married Demetra. She was a pretty and intelligent woman who appreciated John's great heart and antic humor. They had a son named Andre. Andre was a bald baby and seemed to enjoy being held up to a mirror under my beard so that he could see what he would look like when he had one of the big natural hair-dos that were then in fashion. Everyone else in the room would laugh at this foolishness, but not Andre. Something was wrong with him. It was probably autism, but John and Demetra were reluctant to say the word. Autism was thought to be incurable. People who had it were institutionalized for the rest of their lives, and most of them were not treated. Also, Bruno Bettelheim's theory in his book *The Empty Fortress* that autism was caused by rejecting "refrigerator" mothers was still prevalent, and Demetra was certainly not that.

The marriage broke up. We were sorry to see that happen, but disabled children of any kind often put an intolerable strain on a marriage. We also knew that John had a lot of other problems. He would bring Andre by when he was visiting us. Andre soon learned where we kept large spatulas and slotted spoons and would play with them obsessively while John and I talked. John and Demetra went to doctor after doctor, and John became almost as obsessive as Andre in his attempts to communicate. He actually was able to teach Andre a few things, and Andre was able to learn a few more in special school settings.

In the mid-1980s John came to me to tell me that he was dying. He had AIDS. I had known him almost twenty years at that point. He had been particularly helpful in reconciling me to the fact that my son Mike had a different type of mind than mine and would never be academically inclined. Thanks partly to John my grown son and I had become good friends. We had discussed all sorts of things intimately, but I had never once intuited that one of my closest friends was bisexual. He had contracted the disease from a service station attendant who had infected many people in the neighborhood. Then

even more than now, the black community was even less tolerant of homosexuality than the white. There was as yet no cure and no effective treatment. John Ford had only a few years to live.

I reminded John that we were all going to die and that we all had a responsibility to leave our affairs in good order. Andre was approaching adolescence, and tenants in the apartment building were beginning to complain about his odd behavior. Demetra needed a house, and John was going to need special care. When he next visited me, John had cashed in his pension and bought a house in a nice neighborhood. Demetra had agreed to take care of him as best she could when he needed it.

We tried to show John some good times. I recall one special evening when we ate minted yoghurt dishes at an Afghan Restaurant called the Helmand which was run by a relative of the person who is now the president of Afghanistan. Then we went to a revue featuring one of our favorite comedians, Aaron Freeman. John especially liked a variation on Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First" routine updated to satirize officials of the George H. W. Bush administration and a moving sequence in which Freeman talked about the death of a relative. Every five years we hold a joint birthday party with my good friend Lou Snider who was born on the same day of the same year. We have special fun introducing his gay friends to my straight friends and vice versa. Our mutual fifty-fifth birthday in 1989 was held at my house, and John Ford, now gaunt from his advancing disease, was our special guest of honor. I kissed him on the forehead as he left to show everyone present how much I loved my friend.

Andy and I returned from Russia in July, 1990, where our chief adventure had been to take three thousand condoms from ACT/UP Chicago to the Moscow Gay and Lesbian Union in an effort to convince the Soviet leadership that AIDS was their problem, too. I wanted to tell John all about it, and soon did on a day when I took John to a clinic when Demetra could not provide transportation. I had to lift him in and out of the car. He had found a church which would accept him, and this was a great solace. He was also very happy about what he and Demetra had been able to do for Andre and for each other. That evening Demetra called to ask if I had given John a bath. I had not, but he had imagined it. A few weeks later he was dead. As at many African American funerals I have attended, friends of John were asked to testify. I did, but I broke down almost

completely. Lou Snider said that he had never seen me weep as I did that day. We still stay in touch with Demetra and keep up with Andre.

We have had good neighbors, some of whom became very close to us. Andy and I have lived in the same house ever since October, 1966, and do not intend to move unless a move is forced on us by poor health. It is a small place, two floors of four hundred square feet each plus a full basement, but we need nothing larger, especially nothing larger that would oblige us to employ a servant. I am not handy around the house or in the yard, and we enjoy living in a cooperative that cuts our grass in summer, clears our main sidewalk in winter, maintains our furnace and major appliances, pays our share of local property taxes, repairs our roof and replaces our kitchen flooring as needed, all for a monthly payment that is far less than the rentals on similar dwellings nearby. We are allowed to take our share of our group mortgage payment off our income tax. Our biggest problems are finding shelf space for our books and recordings and wall space for our pictures. We get along nicely with our neighbors but do not socialize with them much.

This was not true when we first moved in. We were refugees then. We had been forced to leave our previous house on the Southwest Side of Chicago because our neighbors had smashed our windows, set fire to our garage, and repeatedly smashed the windshield of our car. They were angry because we were taking part in open housing marches led by Martin Luther King and had African American guests in our home. Our new home in the London Towne Houses development was still under construction when we were evicted, and we spent six weeks sleeping on the floors in the apartment of our friend Inez Gibbs. We had been persuaded to move to the new development by our Socialist comrade Max Weinrib. Max had taken a huge loss when the suburban village of Deerfield condemned and tore down the racially integrated housing he was trying to build there. He was working as a salesman for the new cooperative, a venture for limited income families who were yet making too much money to live in public housing. The majority of the new cooperative dwellers would be African American, and Max was trying to attract some whites to integrate the development. It was within walking distance of the school where I was teaching, and it seemed like a good move for us.

This type of cooperative was the brainchild, of Robert Weaver, John Kennedy's secretary of housing and urban development. Its only subsidy was the lower mortgage

interest rate provided by the Veterans Administration, one half that of the Federal Housing Authority. Member families held equal shares in the venture, and we were all on the same forty year mortgage. It was an opportunity for African American families who still could not get regular mortgages in the mid-1960s, regularly employed postal workers, police, teachers, and other civil servants. It was one of the first programs killed by the incoming Nixon administration in 1969, but London Towne Houses was already in place.

While the first houses were going up, Andy was picked as the vice-president of the membership organization that would run the place, and, when the first membership elections for the board of directors was held, she was elected to it. Meetings were frequent, for it was a struggle to keep the construction company building our units to adhere to its promises. Many contracts had to be negotiated and rules had to be made. We had to deal with many unexpected problems like getting our private streets cleaned after a record-breaking blizzard in January, 1967. We borrowed shovels, stud finders so that we would know where to attach shelving, spirit levels, and much else from each other. The new neighbors with whom we bonded most closely were Wilma Bryant and her husband Rodney.

They were a retired couple living two doors down from us in a one bedroom unit. Rodney Bryant was handy with tools. I think of him every time I look at the ingenious hanging tray he devised for our broiling pans in our small kitchen and the uneven line from his saw when he trimmed the top of the folding door to our living room closet so that it would close properly. The unevenness possibly indicates that Rodney had had too much to drink when he did the sawing, a rather frequent occurrence. He had old-fashioned ways and could not bring himself, despite my encouragement, to call a white man like me by my first name. We enjoyed sitting on our front porches in good weather and commenting on the passing parade, especially on the fast drivers who encountered our newly installed speed bumps and the young women in their fashionable miniskirts. Eventually relations cooled between him and Wilma, and he moved out to Arizona, but Wilma stayed our neighbor for the rest of her days.

She loved our children, especially our son Mike who was just three when we moved in, and kept an eye on them when we could not. She was full of ideas for

neighborhood improvements. Not all of them worked out. We had artificial electric candles for one Christmas season, but the wire that ran under our metal front door to them wore through and gave us a considerable shock. She was a great source of information on the doings of our neighbors, although there was no real malice in her gossip. She would join us occasionally on family outings. I recall her great enjoyment when I took her with our children to see a program of Charlie Chaplin three-reel comedies, which she had not seen since they were originally released many decades earlier.

One summer in the early 1970s I had an unexpected visit from a couple who had been my students in summer school some years before. He was the son of Polish immigrants. She was African American. They had gone to the same university and eventually married. They had just returned from a trip to Poland where they had met many of his relatives and she had been fully accepted as a member of the family. They had decided to call on their old teacher, always a great reward for those of us in the teaching profession. They had brought an oddly shaped bottle of Polish vodka. Andy was gone visiting her mother in Arizona, I was in my usual loquacious mood, and we stayed up until the wee hours trading stories, drinking vodka, and eating a jar of pickled herring that I provided.

The next day Wilma asked me about the oddly shaped vodka bottle that she had noticed in the garbage dumpster that served both our units. She shared J. Edgar Hoover's faith in the intelligence-revealing properties of garbage and was especially curious about the card attached to the bottle which read "for our teacher Mr. Brisben from the social climber." I explained that this was a reference to the answer to a once famous ethnic slur question "What do you call a Polack who marries a nigger?" I explained that they appeared to be a very happy couple, and Wilma was delighted to hear all about them. She was glad to hear that the woman was not pregnant because one should not drink Polish vodka in that condition.

Wilma attended our son Mike's eighth grade graduation ceremony and the celebration for his high school graduation in 1979. In the 1980s Chicago teachers were offered creativity grants for special projects. I requested three hundred dollars to buy portable tape recorders and tapes so that my U. S. history students could tape

reminiscences of persons over the age of sixty in our neighborhood. A local television station wanted to do an editorial endorsing the project. The assistant editorial director of the station at that time was my former student Bill Campbell, class of 1966. I invited him back to Harlan High School to show the class how interviews should be done, using Wilma Bryant as his subject and being recorded for television. Andy accompanied Wilma to Carson's so she could buy a red pants suit for the occasion. My class was crowded that day, and I had to chase out students who did not belong but wanted to share our television fame.

Wilma was brilliant. She started by telling where the trolley lines used to run in our neighborhood, and proudly recounted her adventures as the first black woman Western Union messenger in Chicago during World War I. She told how she had been taking care of children in a high rise on Lake Shore Drive in 1938 when she saw Franklin D. Roosevelt waving from an open car on his way to dedicate the new Outer Drive Bridge. The students were fascinated and gained a new understanding of what constituted history. We invited her over the next day to hear her tape. She sat on our coffee table next to the tape recorder and kept commenting "You better believe it," and "That's right," to her own remarks.

We knew her health was failing when she declined our repeated invitations to attend our son's wedding. I believe she was incontinent by that time and afraid of being embarrassed in public. She subscribed to one of those services that call you once a day to see if you are all right, but she let it lapse. Her only relative in the Chicago area was a niece, and they were not close. We kept in touch, but not as closely as we should have done. One day a neighbor across the street noticed that two days' mail had accumulated. We called emergency services. Wilma was dead. Evidently she had died instantly when her heart had given out. She had left instructions that she wanted no funeral or memorial service. That left a hole in our world. Memorial services are for the living, and we needed to give Wilma a more formal good-bye than we did. Andy and I are not religious and intend to donate our bodies to a medical school, since we spent our careers being short of needed teaching supplies and do not want physicians in training to feel the same lack. Our friends are difficult to assemble and most of our achievements are long in the past,

but, even if there are only a few of them to say goodbye, we want them to have that chance.

Some of my most memorable friends have been prickly personalities who were very difficult to deal with. One of the prickliest was Virgil Vogel. He was a Socialist who was fierce in his disagreements with comrades and was contemptuous of my tendency to try to build coalitions and overlook minor differences. If Virgil attended several meetings in a row, the number of those attending tended to get smaller and smaller. Nevertheless, he was a brilliant man with many good ideas, and his warnings against suspected police spies or sectarians trying to capture the party often proved accurate. I winced every time he called me, but I usually showed up where he said I should.

In the summer of 1963 Virgil Vogel was one of my colleagues at the Morgan Park Summer High School on the Far South Side of Chicago. He was perhaps temperamentally unsuited to the teaching of adolescents, but he was a learned man and an extremely brave one, having gone to jail as a conscientious objector during World War II. Our classrooms adjoined each other. On the first day of class I heard a loud thump coming through the wall that divided our rooms, then another, and another. I had visions of my fierce comrade banging heads against the wall. I gave my students a brief written assignment and went next door. Virgil was taking text books from a pile that had just been delivered to him and was throwing them one by one against the wall. I asked him what was up. He pointed to a paragraph in an introductory chapter of the texts he had been given.

"This says that American Indians before the European so-called discovery had no medical practice worthy of the name. I grew up in Montana and you grew up in Oklahoma, and we both know that statement is arrogant racist nonsense," he said.

I was happy to back him up. I had known old Indians who chewed willow bark for pain relief. It had the same active ingredient as aspirin. Massage, especially as practiced by those in the Choctaw and Chickasaw cultures, had an efficacy far beyond anything known to regular medical doctors or even chiropractors. The "black drink" that many tribes used as a laxative was more powerful than anything available from a drug store. The students believed two teachers when they might not have believed just one,

and I rejoined my own group which fortunately had remained relatively quiet in my absence.

After classes Virgil asked me where he might get hold of a list of compounds used in standard medical practice, a pharmacopoeia. Our family physician at that time, Dr. Lenin Pellegrino, operated a hippie coffee house as a hobby and kept a pharmacopoeia on hand for those trying to acquire an accurate knowledge of drugs and their effects. He was able to get Virgil a copy at a reasonable price.

This became the basis of Virgil Vogel's doctoral dissertation and his later book *American Indian Medicine*, a fundamental classic in its field. He went through all the plants from which medicine was derived that were listed in the pharmacopoeia, then noted which plants were of western hemisphere origin. This was a quite a substantial percentage. Then he looked for evidence that these plants had been used by Native American healers before they were used by those of European descent. In most cases this evidence was not hard to find. He was able to move to a community college position in which he flourished after he received his doctorate.

In 1973 Virgil Vogel started insisting that I start attending local Socialist Party meetings again, and I did although I was still put off by his manner. A group of conservatives who had supported the Vietnam War had formed a group called Social Democrats USA and had tried to pretend that the Socialist Party no longer existed. A more progressive group whose leading light was Michael Harrington had formed the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, later Democratic Socialists of America, which had some brilliant members but functioned mainly as a left caucus in the Democratic Party. Many state and local branches of the old Socialist Party had never gone out of existence, and, largely because of Virgil Vogel's insistence, they met in Milwaukee, reconstituted themselves as the Socialist Party USA, and chose ex-mayor of Milwaukee Frank Zeidler as its chairman.

In the winter of 1975 the Socialist Workers Party, a formerly Trotskyist group, had worked incredibly hard to get their candidate on the Chicago mayoral ballot. I invited her to speak to my civics classes. She was full of advice on which revolutionary faction to support in Angola but could not adequately answer my students' question about potholes in the streets, bad public transportation service, unjustified police harassment, or

the poor quality of food in the student cafeteria. I reported this encounter at the next Socialist local meeting and suggested that we might put out a platform showing how socialism might relate to local concerns. We worked out several planks, such as banning cars in downtown Chicago to save energy and abolishing fares on public transportation to increase its use. We saw no reason why traffic police should continue to carry deadly weapons, since their European counterparts get along quite well without them. Then Virgil suggested that this platform would get much more publicity if we actually ran a candidate.

Virgil lived in suburban Northbrook by that time, several of our more active members lived in Evanston or Oak Park, and I was one of the few champions of the proletariat who actually lived in the inner city. I did not really care to run, since write-in campaigns get few votes in Chicago and even fewer that are counted, and I had no desire to be ridiculous in public. However, Virgil was a bully and I agreed. We printed up some stickers with platform points that could be illegally stuck on rapid transit ads, managed to get some interviews in community newspapers, had a bullhorn soliciting support at the civic center plaza one afternoon, and got one editorial right to reply from a station that had endorsed Richard J. Daley. Our campaign was a total failure in getting votes. Even my own vote for myself was not counted. However, this negligible effort seemed to signal a revival in the party and had something to do with Frank Zeidler asking me to be his vice-presidential running mate the next year.

I continued to lock horns with Virgil Vogel. He did not want to endorse the founding of the new radical journal *In These Times* because some of the people behind it had been Stalinists of some sort. He balked at nominating David McReynolds as the Socialist candidate for president in 1980 because Dave had come out publicly as gay. Virgil had unhappy memories of the gay community from his World War II prison days. At one point he called me a "professional gasbag", which is unfair because professionals get money for their political effusions and I do not. At one point I asked him to stop attending our local meetings because we could not attract new members with him there. We did not attract many new members without him either. We were as one on many issues, especially on his total support of Native American causes. His continual rage

probably shortened his life. I spoke sincerely of him at a memorial service. I wish his temperament had let me be a better friend.

Some of my friends have disagreed with me far more profoundly than Virgil Vogel. Melvin E. A. Bradford and I began as undergraduate dormitory bull session opponents at the University of Oklahoma and continued to have diametrically opposed political views and similar cultural interests for the rest of his life. After many years of having lost contact with Mel, I heard of him again when he missed being appointed to the National Endowment for the Humanities by President Reagan because he had written an article saying that the abolition of chattel slavery in 1865 was an unwarranted interference with the rights of private property. We met again with our wives in a corner suite in the Drake Hotel that had been provided by a right-wing foundation and immediately resumed the friendly opposition that had been characteristic of us many years before.

This has been true of Andy and me whenever we renew acquaintance with persons from any part of our lives. We always pick up right where we had left off years before. Our friends include old people, although few are as old as us anymore, young people, persons from all over the planet of all races, religions or lack of religions, genders, and sexual orientations, famous people, persons of both deserved and undeserved obscurity, and those who are eccentric to a variety of circles. Our present friends give us great joy, and the absent friends of whom I have mentioned only a few are a permanent part of our being.

---J. Quinn Brisben