
Shared Reminiscence

I Love the Sound of My Name, Betty Birren

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Betty loved Red: red sweaters, red jackets, red dresses. Red came through in her personality; she was fiery, passionate, quick. She may have been petite, seemingly overpowered by Jim, but she could hold her own and then some. She was not an extension of Jim, even though after 70 years of marriage it was always, ‘Jim and Betty’ when thinking of either one of them. Betty “collaborated” with Jim from the beginning, completing her master’s degree one day and giving birth to Barbara the next day. She worked alongside Jim in the field of aging, travelled with him to conferences, joined him on sabbaticals, wrote articles with him and was the supreme proof reader with an eye for detail that caught every error. Even in the most recent years when Betty’s short-term memory was slipping, she could pull up names and dates from Gerontology conferences held 40 years earlier. She was remarkable in many ways!

Not only was Betty an organizer, being one of the founding members of the California Council for Geriatrics and Gerontology (CCGG) but also very organized. She once showed me her very, very small address book she used to keep track of her Christmas card list. Along with the names and addresses, she included the year, card sent and received. If she had not received a return card in two years, that recipient was methodically crossed off her list to make room for new friends.



Jim and Betty, 2013

When Betty travelled with Jim and the family, she was the photographer, but her skills did not stop there. Once home, Betty created elaborate scrapbooks and photo albums to commemorate the trips. She not only included the photos, but also menus, receipts, theater tickets. She was the collector of minutia par excellence! Each book is a living treasure that brings to life the memory of the trip.

Betty was known for her quick wit and quirky sense of humor. She was the type of person I have always wanted to be – the one to come up with a good retort on the spot and not the next day! One of my students asked Betty her secret for such a long marriage. Without missing a beat Betty replied, “Count to ten before you speak, have a sense of humor, and marry the right person.” Yes, Betty married the right person!

I really got to know Betty when I collected all her Guided Autobiography stories into her own memoir, “I Love the Sound of My Name, Betty Birren”. I read all the stories of her life she had written over the course of countless GAB classes. Betty was a woman of integrity and values who always tried to do her best. Betty

herself sums up her life the best, “The most important thing for me in my work life has been being with other people and working with them for common goals.” Betty Birren was a kind, supportive, and funny person who will be missed by all who knew her.