

“Do What You Think is Interesting, Necessary, and Useful”

This is the latest installment of “Growing Older & Wiser in Brookline.”

Readers are welcome to suggest names of local seniors to be profiled in future articles to author Miriam Rosalyn Diamond at mdiamond@brooklinema.gov

Writer and professor Marilyn Jurich is the child of European immigrants who owned a stationery shop in her birthplace of Manhattan. Captivated by music, one of her cherished memories is performing an Edward MacDowell composition before an audience at age 11, wearing a pink dress purchased from Best & Company. She received a call for encores and was awarded a silver medal for her performance. She went on to study Drama and Education at Hunter College. This was followed by graduate school, first in Drama, then English, at Northwestern University and University of Illinois. It was in Illinois that she began her career in academia. She also met and married Joseph Jurich. After several moves they relocated to the Boston area when he was hired to teach at Boston University. They made their home in Chestnut Hill along with their daughter. Wary of assigning grades and the politics involved, Marilyn considered becoming a Nutritionist. It would have been a complex endeavor at that time, requiring a doctorate degree in a completely different field. So she continued on as an English professor, spending much of her career as Associate Professor at Suffolk University. She introduced new courses into the curriculum including Children’s Literature, Science Fiction, The Yiddish Short Story, as well as Fantasy and Folklore. In the latter, she invited students to interview and share with each other the experiences of real people with whom they had little interaction until that point. As a result, the course participants learned more about a variety of cultures. For one particularly memorable presentation, the student brought a cake from the Greek community that was baked for one week at 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Because Marilyn also taught about Mythology, Suffolk University sent her to conduct research in Delphi, Greece “the center of poetry, music, and drama.” She treasured her stay there, finding Greece “a very poor country and a very giving country.” Marilyn also studied poetry in Spoleto, Italy. She recalls the brutal summer heat (“it was so hot the insects were dying”) that necessitated writing while sitting in a bathtub at 2 in the morning. In Spoleto, Marilyn also attended auditions of rising opera stars, thinking “This is amazing. I’m in heaven now.” Music continues to be a source of enjoyment for her, particularly Wagner’s operas. Marilyn states that “reading to me is who I was.” Poetry in particular gives her a sense of purpose. She is the author of books and articles, including Scheherazade’s Sisters on women in folklore and Defying the Eye Chart (2008), an acclaimed collection of poems. (The title refers to vision challenges that she has faced.) The verse “Reading the Eye Chart,” includes the lines: This is the alphabet of ferns singing between the passages of wind.

A frequent participant of Brookline Senior Center programs, Marilyn is especially devoted to the poetry group. In that setting, she recently shared a moving verse from *The New Yorker* magazine and encouraged her peers to engage more with writings addressing current events and devastation (and not exclusively on topics of joy and love). One of her life lessons has been “to be much more open to people and to recognize quirks that are important and significant...” She finds that connecting with “interesting people with different interests” broadens her perspective. She feels that anger is her key strength, recalling a time when one student consistently turned in papers that were messy, stained, difficult to read and comprehend. After a few submissions, she told him she could no longer accept such work. He later thanked her for holding her standards and began taking his assignments more seriously. Incidents like this helped her realize the power of anger. Inspired by “people who don’t get any celebration,” Marilyn recalls a worker at Bruegger’s Bagels named Flo who connected lonely people with others, while she herself suffered quietly. Marilyn was moved by Flo’s kindness and wrote a poem about her. Marilyn’s Aunt Rose was another source of inspiration, projecting “humor, vivacity, charity, and tremendous kindness.” As a youngster, Marilyn had difficulty finding nice clothing that fit her full figure. Rose, a buyer at Ohrbach’s department store, gifted her niece a flattering brown corduroy jumper that Marilyn gladly wore for many years with different blouses and accessories. The two often went to downtown Manhattan together, enjoying spaghetti while seated at a cafe counter. The poet Milton is of great interest to Marilyn. She treasures the music, myths, and spiritual themes of this blind poet. She notes that his success was abetted by his wealth, the scribes he hired, his determination and faith. Marilyn continues to write and is seeking a publisher for her next poetry book. She anticipates “an assemblage of people who are working together and enjoying what they present to others and to each other.” She encourages people “to be accepting.” She would advise her younger self to “resist” as well as “continue to do what you think is interesting, necessary, and useful.”