

Friends Forever

By Jan Collins

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Our long-distance friendship began in the late 1950s when we were both schoolgirls in the elementary grades. Names and addresses of potential “pen pals” had been passed around my classroom, and I chose a girl named Penny Power from Wanganui, New Zealand. That South Pacific island nation was far, far away from my home in Michigan, and it seemed like a wonderfully exotic place.

We became pen friends.

The letters flowed between us for nearly 20 years. We grew up together in a way, exchanging confidences about our studies, our hobbies, our boyfriends, our families. We each had three siblings, and Penny, as a young teenager, was helping to raise her younger brothers and sister after their mother died suddenly.

When President Kennedy was shot, I received a heartfelt letter of condolence from Penny and her father, who were as taken with the young President as most Americans were.

Penny and I exchanged Christmas gifts and photos over the years, and we got married within two weeks of each other in 1967.

And then in 1977, we finally met in London. That rendezvous was miraculous, actually. Each couple had unknowingly planned a trip to England for the same time – arriving, amazingly, on the very same day in May.

Penny Power Dean and I met at a little hotel near the British Museum, and then we talked the night away at a tiny restaurant in Soho and at one of London’s ubiquitous pubs.

I learned some things I hadn’t known before, such as: Penny had a wickedly funny sense of humor, was extremely knowledgeable about world affairs, and loved the British Royal Family.

We met again a few days later at Speakers Corner in Hyde Park, where anyone can heft his or her own soapbox and orate about the burning issues of the day. A final get-together was held to share the good fortune of acquiring tickets to the

Strangers Gallery in Parliament, where Prime Ministers face their colleagues in the House of Commons twice a week for raucous question-and-answer sessions.

Fast forward to 1988, when I decided it was high time to visit Penny and her husband Lindsay, a middle-school teacher, in New Zealand. They squired me around their stunningly beautiful country for two weeks, displaying their nation's scenic and culinary wonders. Then we popped over to Singapore -- only a 10-hour flight from New Zealand, which the Kiwis consider a short jaunt.

Penny and Lindsay visited me in the United States a number of times after that. I introduced them to American cities in the South, the West, New England, and the Midwest. We even moseyed across the border into Canada. Over the years several members of my family -- including my mother, my children, two nieces and a nephew -- toured New Zealand, always with the enthusiastic help and advice of the Deans.

Decades flew by. I continued my career as a journalist and editor while Penny found her calling as a human resources specialist with the New Zealand Railway. Life intervened: Lindsay Dean died in 1997. I divorced in 1984 and remarried in 1998.

Ten years after that, it seemed like a good time to introduce my husband Ted to the gorgeous spectacle that is New Zealand. So in 2008, we made the long, long trek across the Pacific. Penny was at the airport to greet us.

The last time Penny and I got together was in July 2013 when we toured Toronto and Chicago and then visited my mother at her summer home in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. But my friend and I email each other every week or so, and we talk on the phone every couple of months. (Hand-written letters went by the board years ago.)

We have decided that we're really like sisters, and we marvel that we almost always agree on politics and social issues and about how life should be lived.

We are planning our next rendezvous for the summer of 2016, when Penny and I expect to meet in Hawaii. We don't have a grand agenda, but we know that when we reunite in Honolulu for our holiday, we will talk and talk -- and then we'll talk some more.

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