

A Celebration of Nancy Stein Frappier

Jon Frappier*

THE PERSON THAT NANCY STEIN FRAPPIER WOULD BECOME WAS GREATLY influenced by her relationship with her father, Saul Stein. Judy, her younger sister, remembers that when Nancy was nine or 10 years old, their father took them to hear the popular folk singer Pete Seeger, who is well known for his music about people's struggles to form unions, for racial equality and peace, and for popularizing the song "We Shall Overcome" during the Civil Rights Movement. Seeger's concert was held in a Michigan barn, not an auditorium. By the mid-1950s, he and many others had been blacklisted by the government, making it difficult to find work. But he continued to sing and pluck his five-string banjo and even signed the cast covering Nancy's broken ankle.

During this period, Saul Stein, a physician, flirted with socialism. Judy added that, "according to our mother, he never sent out a bill. His goal was to cure and help and if his patients couldn't or wouldn't pay, so be it. He was a very caring man, and to my mind, unprejudiced. Nancy was very much his daughter, with her caring regard for all people, and her warm and generous spirit." For that reason, Judy was puzzled "why he took Nancy's foray into leftist politics as a rebellion of any kind. Surely, it was really just an extension of his own beliefs." Yet their relationship remained close until her father passed away.

Nancy and I met in Ann Arbor, Michigan, during the summer of 1967. She loved Detroit, which at the time was the site of one of the most devastating riots in US history. After the smoke had cleared, there were 43 dead, 1,189 injured, over 7,200 arrests, and more than 2,000 buildings destroyed. The impact of this on Nancy was immense, as reflected in the writings she left behind when reflecting about when she was a 20 year old:

In 1967, there were riots in Detroit and part of the city was burning. I remember feeling very scared and confused. Why were people burning down their own neighborhoods? I didn't really understand what it was about, but the effect it had on me was life changing. I resolved to try to do something about the underlying causes of the riots and about other injustices in the world.

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By then, the direction of Nancy's life had become very clear to her. Later that year, we moved to New York City. Her job at Rockefeller University involved research on child development—a topic she cared deeply about—but it was 1968 and all of her spare time went into political work. The situation became increasingly tense as the Vietnam War escalated, Martin Luther King was assassinated, and Bobby Kennedy was killed. Students at Columbia University had taken over Columbia President Grayson L. Kirk's office to protest the university's racism and support for the war. Nancy participated in this protest and contributed to a pamphlet entitled *Who Rules Columbia* (North American Congress on Latin America, 1968). This publication became a model for other campuses. I recall being with Nancy at 4:00 a.m. as she photocopied President Kirk's correspondence and papers, which substantiated everything the protest had discussed in terms of democracy and governance, racism and urban real estate, as well as the defense/intelligence research nexus. It was a very satisfying moment, finding smoking guns. The borrowed (or liberated) documents were promptly returned to their hiding place in the president's office.

In August 1969, Nancy and I learned an early lesson in the dos and don'ts of organizing. We had packed up a car in New York with antiwar literature, buttons and such, and headed with friends to an event called Woodstock that we thought was ripe for organizing. We soon realized that we needed a Plan B, and instead quickly joined the multitude and listened to incredible music for the next few days. When we awoke on the first morning, in the tent across from us was Meher Baba's group, followers of the late Indian mystic who had described himself as the Avatar, God in human form. Nancy and I talked about that experience for many years.

By 1969, many activists viewed Cuba as an example of how people could change things for the better. Their revolution had overthrown a military dictator, taken back their country from US control, and expelled the Mafia from its playground. The immediate priorities of the Cubans were to end massive illiteracy and to provide education and health care for all. Powerful interests in the United States did not approve, so the blockade of Cuba began. In New York City, Nancy became involved in discussions about how North Americans could show solidarity and help to break the blockade. Out of those meetings the plan for the Venceremos Brigade emerged and Nancy decided to be part of that effort. After moving to the Bay Area to enter graduate school at the University of California, she soon began to organize people to go on the first Brigade to Cuba, where they worked on agricultural and construction projects and met the Cuban people. For three years, Nancy's participation on the National Committee of the Brigade helped to establish it as an ongoing endeavor. Because this took place during the Nixon presidency, the task of organizing

hundreds of people to go on the numerous brigades also involved the screening out of agents and provocateurs.

Nancy rose to the challenge in so many ways. Over 8,000 *brigadistas* have made the journey to Cuba so far. People she worked with were saddened to hear of her passing, among them National Committee members and their Cuban counterpart. They described her as “the youngest of us and in many ways the brightest,” adding that her “hard work and commitment to the Brigade was key to its success. She was truly one of the unspoken heroes of the Brigade Venceremos.” She was a sweet person, who “touched people with her goodness, her warmth, and we could not have done it without her.” She “will be remembered for her compassion, integrity, and commitment.”

I, too, will be forever grateful for Nancy’s love and kindness, for our years together, and especially for our beautiful daughters Diana and Emily. She was a wonderful mother, which explains why her girls and grandchildren were so close to her. They also gave her much joy. I picture her reading to her granddaughter Justice. One of the most recent books that Justice asked me to read was a story about Helen Keller’s life. Keller’s words are apropos to all who loved Nancy: “What we have once enjoyed we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.” But we will miss Nancy’s voice, reading aloud, and her Christmas spirit. In all my years, I have never known another Jewish person, or Christian for that matter, who loved Christmas like Nancy did. And so the next holidays will be very difficult for our family.

