



This Religion column is a regular feature written for the Gallup Independent by Gallup area residents, representing different faith communities, who share their ideas about bringing a spiritual perspective into our daily lives and community issues. For information about contributing a guest column, contact Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola at The Independent: (505) 863-6811 ext. 218 or lizreligion01@yahoo.com.

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A Huge Hole in Gallup

In a few days, Gallup, New Mexico will be diminished. Only a handful of folks will notice, for this is one of those times when the economies of this world do not quite add up. This is a story of weakness rather than strength, of loss rather than gain, of humility rather than pride.

On September 10, a woman by the name of Nella will be moving away from our community to a retirement center in the Midwest. The Rehoboth community and a number of Gallup citizens will weep as she departs. This precious, 82 year old woman has been a rock for us for over three decades.

How is it that a modest preacher's wife, a woman of minimal financial means, someone who has not held a "professional" position for 50 years could accumulate such affection? What is it about her life that has touched hundreds, maybe thousands, and made us all better along the way?

Nella Veenstra moved here in 1969 with her husband, Rev. Rolf Veenstra and their three elementary aged sons. She believed her highest calling in life was to be a wife and mother, and considered herself a "liberated woman" who did not have to work outside the home. She devoted herself to loving Rolf, her boys, and two step-daughters. In the process, she seemed to have so much love left over for the rest of us.

The essence of her life was her Christian faith. She took to heart what her husband preached every Sunday, that when we become Christians, we are "new creatures," that Christ lives in us, and that we can live a glorious life of faith, hope and love. Every day for Nella was and is an invitation for Jesus to reign—"to live is Christ."

Such faith will surely inspire a life of prayer, and so it has with Nella. She prays way more than most of us, and she has seen the results. So have many of us who have had the privilege to know her, and to pray with her. We have wanted Nella to be praying for us—there is something special about that.

She believed the Tennyson line, "More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." So before Rolf passed away, and after, they/she would pray for each household on the Rehoboth campus as they walked past. My wife and I wonder where our kids would be today without Nella's prayers.



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Nella's spirituality was also earthy—she cared about this world in all of its complexity. She loved a good poem, an exciting ballgame, a new dress—these were all gifts from God for the people of God. Sweet potato casserole at Cracker Barrel was a special treat from God. Once, while eating fresh raspberries in Washington State, she became convinced of what led to Eve's fall.

There is little about this woman that dried up with age, certainly not her sense of humor. Having been married to the ultimate jokester, she has laughed so steadily that after 8 decades she can still give you a hoot with her voice and a twinkle with her eye. She has little patience for a dour or sour faith.

Nor has her mind gone stale. Recently we hosted, at Rehoboth, the annual convention of Christian Schools International. There was Nella, at every keynote speech and most workshops, taking it all in. This summer she cheerfully sat through three consecutive sermons on a Wednesday evening at First Baptist in Gallup.

Which illustrates another key to Nella's Christian walk—while she loved and respected her Dutch Calvinist heritage, she knew that other church traditions had insights and patterns that were God-ordained and inspired. She was catholic—small "c", and loved her friendships with Christians and non-Christians of all stripes.

And her walk was literal—to this day, now a slower pace, she walks. Exercise was a matter of taking care of the body that God has given her. Before Rolf's passing in 1991, they would ceaselessly ride their bikes to town—some of you old-timers will remember those old bicycles, each with a tall red flag. It was a bit of a comedy.

All this done in the obscurity of Gallup, New Mexico—more particularly, Rehoboth. Content to live in an older mobile home for now nearly 30 years, it was not the kind the world would esteem. But out of it flowed warm hospitality, in it lived a model of contentment, from it will move a "hero of faith." And our community will be smaller, much smaller.

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