

Julia Watson McClanahan Part Two

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column the week of October 11, 2021)

When I posted the link to the first part of this story on Facebook, Searcy New responded saying, "A wonderful human!! I miss her so much!! Her (Steve finished it) book chronicles her life!! I am more than blessed to have walked through much of it as her friend, mentor, and sister in Christ!! Loved my Julie!!" I have ordered the book, *My Life with Chronic Illness and God's Grace*. It is available on Amazon.com.

Benita Albert concludes her two-part series bringing us insight into one of her previous students who had rheumatoid arthritis and the life she lived despite it. If you read part one of Julie's story, you are primed and ready for this second part. Benita brings her story to life, and you will be immersed in an amazing person's journey. Julia Watson McClanahan was truly one unflappable and persevering lady!

It was my privilege to write a letter of recommendation for Julia Watson (ORHS Class of '79) for her application to Vanderbilt University. Forty-one years later, imagine my surprise to receive a request from Steven McClanahan to include my letter in the book he was publishing in Julia's honor.

Steven, Julia's husband of thirty-six years, discovered after her death in 2019 that Julia had saved special papers, mementos, and handwritten journals of her life story which were stored away in her personal effects. He considered this discovery his call to action, a gift from his "Julie," to not only him and their immediate family, but also to the world. That book, published in 2021 from Julia's memoirs and coauthored by Steven McClanahan, is entitled "My Life with Chronic Illness and God's Grace." (WestBow Press)

I clearly recalled the pressure I felt in making sure Vanderbilt would select Julia. It was her dream school. I knew that Julia's unique life adjustments due to Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis (JRA) and her tenacity, dedication, and optimistic approach in all her endeavors were proof positive of her academic and social potential.

She enrolled in Vandy classes in the Fall of 1979, aspiring to a molecular biology degree followed by medical school. She grew close to her new Nashville doctor as they worked through her medical needs while also discussing future medical studies and the rigors of an internship and residency. Due to recurring hip problems and the doctor's advice to stay off her feet whenever possible, Julia was able to take meals and have other essential needs delivered to her in her dorm room thanks to the many caring friends she easily made.

During summers of her college years, Julia returned to Oak Ridge and internship positions at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory for two summers followed by a third, summer position at Oak Ridge Associated Universities (ORAU) in the Center for Epidemiological Research, a perfect fit for her studies and as it turned out, for her future. She learned that the long Vanderbilt science labs where she was required to stand were taxing on her body, making her plans for a medical degree more problematic. Thus, she graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Molecular Biology and Sociology from Vanderbilt in 1983, and she accepted a fulltime job with ORAU where she would find her niche in conducting and analyzing medical research studies.

College summers in Oak Ridge meant reuniting with good friends, with her medical team at home, and finding the man who would steal her heart, Steven McClanahan, in the summer of 1980. Though the Watson and McClanahan families attended the same church and lived in the same East Village neighborhood, Julia and Steven had never formally met.

Steven was a 1972 ORHS graduate with a University of Tennessee Mechanical Engineering degree. Steven's first job was in the Y-12 Emergency Control Center where he began in 1976. At his mother's urging, Steven asked Julia for a dinner-and-movie date.

Julia wrote of that first date: "We talked and had a great time...He never once asked about my arthritis, deformed fingers, or limp. He wanted to get to know me as a person, not as a person with arthritis." Ten days later, Julia left for her Vandy sophomore year. Steven and she wrote each other often and made many long-distance calls which in those days were quite costly.

Charming memories of that first date, told from Steven's perspective for the book, included: "She had beautiful brown eyes that missed nothing, auburn hair, and a great smile and laugh. She was intelligent, extremely mature, and confident

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for her age. In the vernacular of my day, she was mighty fine." Invited to attend a Vandy football game with Julia, Steven was told the dress code for Commodores was a coat and tie, very different from Steven's laidback, UT Vol experience.

During the summers of '81 and '82 Steven learned lessons in the difficulties posed by arthritic flareups, including how and when it was appropriate to offer help. Julia deeply appreciated his concern and honesty in telling her she should not feel it necessary to mask her pain. Their frank discussions included Steve's expressed desire to be Julia's "safe place." Before the end of Summer '81, Julia professed her love for Steven, a man she would marry in June of 1983.

During the intervening time between engagement in February 1982 and marriage, the couple had serious talks about arthritis, Julia's future health prognosis, childbearing uncertainties, and committing their lives to a Christian home, following the example of their parents. Steven met with Julia's beloved surgeon and advocate, Dr. Joseph DeFiore, to hear the history and the progression of her disease where he told Steven that he could not possibly imagine the pain she faced daily, adding, "Pray to God you never do!"

Steven rented their first home, an A-house he chose because of the lack of steps and easy accessibility. And to their delight, Julia was chosen the June Bride, and the couple's story was featured in a sixteen-page insert in *The Oak Ridger* prior to their wedding. Steven and Julia were settling into their hometown where they were close to family and friends, near Julia's longtime medical providers, employed with interesting jobs, and ready to launch what would be an incredible thirty-six-year partnership and love story.

Their marriage would be tested early by recurring issues in with Julia's arthritis, a total knee replacement in 1986 and the first time in her illness that her mother did not stay overnight in the hospital. Steven insisted on taking the overnight watch while still reporting to work each day. A second total hip replacement came in 1987, and with that recovery, a doctor's recommendation was made that Julia quit her job.

Though she loved the research she was honored to do with ORAU, Julia and Steven knew that they wanted children, and they made the precautionous decision to adopt. Julia also accepted volunteer work with the local Arthritis Foundation at the urging of Dr. Defiore, and she began the first of many TV interviews on public awareness of the chronic disease, arthritis.

February 23, 1988 was the day six-month-old Justin arrived in their home, followed in December 1990 by a new brother, Eric. Being only four-days old when he arrived, Eric required more care than Julia alone could provide, but with the help of family and Steven's taking on nighttime duty, the family thrived. Julia wore splints on her arms to assuage difficulties with lifting and carrying. When Eric was hospitalized for a week due to Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV), it was Julia who continuously stayed by his bedside in the place she knew so well, East Tennessee Children's Hospital.

Julia wrote, "The one thing about being a mom I had not thought about was how to explain my arthritis to my boys." She recalled a conversation with three-year-old Justin where he had asked her to do something she was unable to do. Her explanation and his empathetic response were remembered by Julia as, "Mommy can't do that because I have arthritis. To this, he usually replied, 'That's okay Mommy. It'll be better.' He understood that arthritis is a disease that sometimes makes Mommy's body hurt. He knew that I took medicine and that sometimes I had to wear splints to protect my joints."

Julia's openness and compassion, in particular for children with chronic diseases, was expressed so beautifully in a third-grade classroom speaking engagement at Willow Brook Elementary School. One of the third-grade girls had been recently diagnosed with JRA. Julia's written memories of that day read, "The children seemed to be receptive and interested. The little girl expressed her feelings about being teased and others thinking she was contagious. Boy, did I understand! My goal was to encourage the other children to help and encourage her as my friends had encouraged me."

Memories of her son Eric's compassion included a kindergarten field trip where Julia volunteered as a chaperone. Julia wrote, "(Eric) was so excited to have me there. I had Eric and three others in my group, and as we held hands to head for the bus, Eric said, 'Now don't run 'cause my mom has arthritis and is like a turtle sometimes.' I laughed as we headed to the bus."

Julia was committed to making the most of every moment of her life. She only paused when the pain overwhelmed her ability to proceed, and even then, she pushed through incredibly challenging surgeries and other medical treatments with

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her sense of self and humor intact. Her personality and dedication made her selection as the Vice-chair and then Chair of the Tennessee Arthritis Foundation a popular choice. It was a four-year commitment coming after Julia's completion of an assignment on the national board of the American Juvenile Arthritis Organization (AJAO). In the latter capacity, she traveled often and spoke at conferences as well as lobbied for compassionate laws and research funding for chronic diseases.

Her decision to accept another highly active role with the Tennessee Arthritis Foundation was difficult at best as she was facing more physical and medical challenges. Of her decision to proceed, Julia wrote, "As I considered this opportunity, I spoke to a self-help group, and afterward a lady stopped me and said, 'This is your ministry, isn't it?' I had never exactly thought about it in exactly those terms, but it was my ministry, my way of helping others and sharing my faith." Over the next four years, Julia would travel, write, speak, and advocate for legislations such as the Children's Health Care Act of 2000, and the Arthritis Action Plan, a joint venture of the CDC and the Arthritis Foundation.

Julia accompanied 1,200 children with chronic illnesses to Washington D.C. where the traditional group picture of visitors at the Capitol had to be moved to the East Lawn, a more accommodating venue. Many congressional members, whom she described as deeply moved by the children, came to be a part of the greeting and resultant ceremonies. A footnote to this story is that ultimately the CDC received \$70 million, and the NIH received \$1.24 billion increases in support of arthritis research.

Realizing that her health was becoming more and more compromised, Julia regretfully turned down an appointment to the Arthritis Foundation National Board of Trustees. She received numerous honors over her years of volunteering. Her awards were certainly well deserved, and she was appreciative of the recognition. But in her usual laidback style, Julia also memorialized the lighter moments.

One example was the keynote speech given by pop singer Frankie Avalon at a Knoxville Arthritis Foundation charitable dinner, The Circle of Hope. Julia was shocked to hear him highlight her story in his remarks. Afterwards, as she thanked him for his words, he not only hugged her, but gave her a kiss on the cheek. She wrote, "It took me a while to go to sleep that night. Frankie Avalon kissed me!"

She also fondly recalled a chance to golf with Martha Sundquist, Tennessee's First Lady, in a charitable golf tournament. Julia had played golf in her teens and early adult years with her parents at their favorite getaway in Fairfield Glades. It became increasingly more difficult for her to play over the years, yet she rallied for this special day with the Governor's wife and the attentive and helpful bodyguard who accompanied them.

Among her accolades, Julia would want prioritized her work with a young, struggling reader at Robertsville Junior High through the volunteer reading skills program. Going through a drive-in window some years later, the student recognized Julia. She asked about his schooling. His response follows: "I graduate from high school this year. ...Because you helped me with my reading and told me I can do anything if I worked hard, I was able to make it." Julia retrospectively observed, "In that moment, I truly felt like I had made a difference in someone's life, and I was blessed beyond national awards and recognition."

One of her last public appearances was to attend her ORHS Class of '79 reunion in October of 2019 at the American Museum of Science and Energy. I remember Julia coming through the door with that huge smile I first saw in my classroom forty years earlier. Her ebullience, as always, proved contagious. Little did I know that she pondered not attending as her feet were terribly blistered. She did not want to wear sneakers, but close friends convinced her that no one would care, that her classmates would be heartbroken not to be able to see her. And, as was true of so much of Julia's life and testimony, she counseled and empathized with a classmate who revealed she had been recently diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. Julia died some three weeks later, but her contributions; her example of faith and compassion; and her love of life, friends, and family are lessons of a life well lived.

Julia would not want me to end this story with her death. I believe that she would not mind that I left out details of her fifteen major surgeries and of the painful recoveries and therapies bravely faced. It is fact that her life was incredibly

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challenging, but her life was also an inspiration to so many. The last years of her journaling dropped off significantly, but the inspiring story she left became Steven's challenge to finish.

In the epilogue of the book, Steven wrote: "God was and remains faithful in His promises. God provided blessings just for her. As I look back, I can see that God closed out her life by bringing back many who helped in her life. She had the opportunity to spend time with our grandson, Odin. She was able to send birthday gifts to our grandchildren, Solan and Luna. She went to lunch with ladies from the Bible study group Julia had led. A most precious gift was when Dr. Frank Gray (her longtime surgeon and friend) called her and took her to lunch" (many other examples of kindness followed in this list).

A resume' of Julia's numerous activities, presentations, recognitions, and publications appear in the appendix of the book, a list that seemingly contradicts her too-short fifty-eight years on Earth. She did so much to make our world a better place.

Julia (Julie) never stopped being mindful of the pain of others even when she endured so much of it herself. To read Benita's account of her life where she wisely chose to focus on the many positive aspects rather than dwell upon the numerous surgeries, is to enjoy a life well lived even with chronic illness. Thank you, Benita, and thank you even more Julie!

I opened with a post on Facebook by Searcy New. Let me close this Historically Speaking series by Benita Albert with an email Searcy sent: "Julia (Julie) Watson McClanahan loved and lived big! I count it joy and a privilege to have called Julie, my friend. Julie was an amazing Gal! Despite the maladies life handed her, I never heard her complain. She always had reason for such! She took great pride in all she did, and when she set her mind to do something, consider it done! She never gave in to her life struggles. I was blessed to be one of her youth leaders at camps, choir tours and mission trips! Oh, for the fun escapades! Her family, friends and anyone who met Julie, are better today for having had Julie in their lives! To God be the glory!"

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Julie and Steve relaxing

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Julia and Steven McClanahan at a formal event