

wonderful

MEETING ON A DC TRIP TO ENGLAND

DC student, Miranda Steffes, meets British pen pal of deceased grandmother

(Reprinted with permission from The Crescent-News.)

by Jack Palmer

Miranda Steffes never really got to know her grandmother, but she has vivid memories of her grandmother's long distance letters.

The correspondence began in 1959 when Steffes' grandmother, Linda Walker, began a pen pal relationship with a British student named Julia.

"Both Julia and mom were 14 years old in 1959," said Sherwood resident Candy Steffes, daughter of Linda and mother of Miranda. "As an eighth-grader in Edgerton, mom was given the assignment of writing a letter to someone in another country."

Julia responded and Linda wrote back, and the trans-Atlantic friendship was born.

"They exchanged about six or eight letters every year beginning in 1959," said Candy. "They shared stories through dating their future husbands and having their children. I remember many of those letters as

a kid. I was very fascinated with the whole idea of exchanging letters from someone in England."

Linda had married Norman Kimpel and Julia had married Colin Maidment. The Kimpels had four children, Chris, Cathie, Candy and Carrie. The Maidments had a son named John.

"It was on both their bucket lists to meet when they retired," said Candy. "The idea was for mom and dad to go there, and then have Julia and Colin come here."

Those dreams were shattered in 1994



Miranda Steffes presented DC shirts to her grandmother's pen pal, Julia Maidment, and her husband, Colin, during a DC trip to London. They are shown with students Alison Rifenburg, Veronica Bowsher, Jordan Heiliger, Kayla Uscilowski, and Robert Tanya.

when Linda died suddenly at the age of 48.

"It was right after Miranda's second birthday," said Candy. "Dad wrote Julia to let her know of mom's passing. The two families didn't have any contact after that."

But that changed late last year after Miranda told her parents about her upcoming trip to London.

A 2011 alumnus of Fairview High School and now a Defiance College sophomore, Miranda had been accepted for the college's global initiative to London over spring break in March.

"When we found out she got accepted for this trip we were very excited," said Candy. "And then Miranda said to us, 'Do you think Grandpa Kimpel still has grandma's pen pal address from England?' So we made the call and he found it and gave it to us."

On Dec. 26, Candy wrote to Julia at that old address.

"I explained about Miranda coming to London and asked if there was any chance Julia could meet up with her when she was there," said Candy. "When I sent that letter, no one knew if she was still at the same address."

There was no immediate response, even allowing for the five to seven days for mail service between the U.S. and England.

"I really didn't hear anything. I kept thinking she passed away or moved," said Candy.

Toward the end of January, however, their hopes and prayers were answered.

"Dear Candy," began Julia's response. "How wonderful to hear from you. What a great surprise. I am so pleased to hear you are all doing so well as I have often thought about you over the years and wondered how you were getting on. We would love to meet Miranda when she comes to London. It would be an honor. Colin and I could come up to London on the train. It's about 90 minutes from here."

Julia shared that she worked in a lawyer's office and Colin was a self-employed painter and decorator. Their son, John, was 35 and worked in a local factory which built lifeboats.

"We were so thrilled when we got the letter and even shed a few tears," said Candy. "My dad was very emotional, too."

Miranda immediately approached DC faculty members Dr. JoAnn Burkhardt and Dr. Fred Coulter, who were heading up the

London trip which also included eight other students.

Despite the full itinerary for the six-day whirlwind excursion, the two professors agreed that Julia and Colin could meet the entire group at the Museum of London's cafe on March 10 at 1:30 p.m.

"We hugged each other right away. It was like I had known them my whole life, they felt so much like family."

Miranda Steffes, sophomore

"The people at DC were great," said Candy. "I know they were on a really tight schedule and could have easily told her no. The way it was set up, it also gave an opportunity for everyone to meet Julia and Colin."

Miranda said she will never forget the epic experience of meeting her grandmother's longtime pen pal and her husband.

"We hugged each other right away. It was like I had known them my whole life, they felt so much like family," said Miranda. "They were just like my grandparents, so loving and compassionate. They were so protective of our entire group. They wanted us to stay safe, to watch out for pickpockets."

After lunch, Miranda gave Defiance College T-shirts to the couple (and another to give to their son) and walked around the museum with them about three hours. For her part, Julia presented natural pearl bracelets to Miranda for her and her mother. The words on the bracelets said "good luck."

"I didn't even realize it, but it was Mother's Day in England that day," said Miranda. "That made it even more special. The whole thing was such an amazing experience. But it was so hard to say goodbye. Even Colin had tears in his eyes."

Miranda couldn't wait to call her mother and father (Basil) that night to share the day's experiences.

"Miranda was so excited and that made me so happy," said Candy. "I also received an email that night from Julia. She said how much she loved meeting Miranda and the other kids from the college. Julia had seen baby pictures of Miranda that mom had sent when she was born, but to be able to see her as an adult was a very emotional and happy

time for Julia, and Colin also."

Since Miranda's return, Candy and Julia have been exchanging emails on a frequent basis.

"I email her about every other day. Julia always asks about how Miranda and other family members are doing, and I do the same. I can't begin to tell you how much this has meant to our family."

This past week, Candy received even more wonderful news from Julia.

"She and Colin are coming to visit!" said Candy. "We will be picking them up at the Detroit airport on Sept. 2 and they will be staying with us. They always wanted to do this and now it's going to happen."

Candy credited divine intervention for everything falling into place.

"What were the odds of Julia and Colin being at the same address after 18 years of no contact? What were the odds of Miranda going to a college that offers global educational trips, getting selected to go to London and her professors agreeing on the meeting? What were the odds that the pen pal relationship started with an eighth-grade class assignment and that Miranda's major is middle school education? What were the odds that March 10 was Mother's Day in London? Are all these things coincidence?"

"We truly feel God had his hand in all of this," said Candy. "If there is anyone questioning their faith, they really need to know this story. God has a way of making things work out." ♦

