

NORRIS: A MEMORY

B O N N I E C U L V E R

NORRIS CHURCH MAILER. NORRIS. Her name to all of us in the Wilkes Creative Writing Program. At Wilkes, she was a star in her own right. In fact, I never heard anyone call her Mrs. Mailer. During her campus visits, faculty, students and even our University President stood in line to welcome her and touch her hand. She was grace, charm, humor, and love. Sadly, we all learned these things firsthand in the last years of her life, making us wish we had known her earlier.

Like many of us connected to the Norman Mailer Society, I first met Norris when she and Norman graciously hosted us in their Brooklyn, NY apartment and, for the next several years, wowed us in their Provincetown home (now the Norman Mailer Center and Writers Colony). Norris, sitting near the fireplace on a soft cushioned chair, greeted guests surrounded by her artwork and walls of photographs that captured her public and private life with Norman. Norman holding court at the far end of the great room, settled on the fan-shaped chair that still sits near the harbor window in their former home.

When Mike Lennon and I began developing the Wilkes University graduate creative writing programs, we asked Norman to be the first advisory board member. Anticipating our grand program opening in January, 2005, we held a writers conference on campus as a pre-launch celebration. Norman came to campus and spoke to a sold-out audience about his life and a writer's life in general. Norris was too ill to attend.

Norman not only donated his speaking fee back to Wilkes, but also issued a challenge to the University. He requested that this gift be used to create a writing scholarship in honor of Norris. The first Norris Church Mailer scholarship, awarded to "a student of need and with talent," was given in June, 2005 to Marlon James, one of the first alums and program superstars.

At the next six June residencies, we awarded six other scholarships in her name at our June closing banquet. Norris personally pressed those checks into the recipients' hands at all but one residency.

When she announced her plans to write her memoir, *A Ticket to the Circus*, I not only invited her to campus as a scholarship donor, but also as a writer in her own right. In five consecutive June/January residencies, she held our faculty and students spellbound as she read from the gathering pages of the draft and eventually from the newly released book. As she read to us, as writers we recognized she was baring her writerly soul and sharing in generous ways far beyond the norm. Most writers enter such public venues choosing to read their tried and true material, either the chestnuts that brought them early fame or the raw pages of a newly released novel seeking such fame. She made it clear early on that she was "testing those pages" with us. It was in those years that she became Norris to the entire program, who experienced firsthand her humor, vulnerability, sadness, and hope through her words.

At each of those residencies, I had dinner-length conversations with Norris as we celebrated the residency's end. By that time, Norman was too ill to attend.

At one dinner, a very drunk recipient of the "Norris" award did something publicly that mortified the entire program who sat, watching Norris hand him his scholarship envelope. Upon returning to the head table, an alarmed Beverly Hiscox, a Wilkes University Board member, demanded, "Norris, are you OK?"

Norris immediately responded, "Oh, we joke around all the time." Meanwhile, she had never met this person until that moment. She immediately squeezed my hand under the table and whispered, "Please, let's never tell Norman. He and I love Wilkes. I don't want to upset him."

Feeling responsible for this special guest and her ill treatment on our campus, I pulled aside the assistant director and second Norris scholarship recipient, James Warner, and asked him if we could do something for her. Jim suggested we upgrade the Town Car to a stretch limo for her return ride to Brooklyn. He made the call and the next morning a white limo pulled up in front of her hotel and waited for her.

At 9:00, she called me, "Bonnie, there's no Town Car outside. Is there someone I should call?"

"Norris," I responded, "Is there a white stretch out front?"

“Yes,” she said. “Must be someone’s wedding.”

“Go to the driver,” I said. “Ask if his name is Scott.” I heard her shoes hitting the cement and her query.

“Bonnie,” she said. “He says he’s my driver. This is really for me? He says there’s coffee and breakfast in the back. There’s flowers!”

“Yes, Norris,” I answered. “It’s all yours.”

Upon her arrival back in Brooklyn, she called me. “Thank you again,” she said. “Even Norman never sent a stretch for me. I hold you and Wilkes in no way responsible for that incident last night.” Again, she was gracious to a fault.

In 2010, at our last June residency with her, we once again sent that white stretch. Norman had passed and she told me she was struggling health-wise. At our ending banquet, we always present a gift to our featured speakers and guests. From plaques to gift certificates, to jewelry (in Norris’s case only), we presented our keynote and special guests with hopefully specially selected gifts. At her last residency, 2010, I gave Norris a Boscov’s gift certificate. This discount department store had become her favorite Wilkes-Barre shopping center. She loved to fill the trunk of the car we sent for her with bags from Boscov’s and some nearby consignment shops.

She grabbed my hand as soon as we returned to the head table. “I don’t know when I can use this,” she said. “I might not be back. . . .”

I was stunned. Then I called over my two office assistants for the week—Elsa Higby and Samantha Bedford. Each summer, I hired outside staff for the week to replace the graduate assistants who performed such office duties during the online terms. In the residency weeks, the G.A.s needed to be students.

Elsa, wife of a long-time faculty member, Phil Brady, and someone with her own impressive organizational resume, and Sam, my daughter, who had worked for two years as the Wilkes University athletic department’s office assistant, were the June staff. When I told them about the Boscov’s certificate dilemma for Norris, they immediately offered to go shopping with her the next morning.

I returned to the head table and whispered to Norris, “I talked with Sam and Elsa and they will take you to Boscov’s before you go back to NYC.”

“But what about the limo?” she asked.

“The service will pick up Sam and Elsa at 8:45. You at 9:00. The driver

will wait, however long you wish, outside Boscov's while you spend that certificate."

Samantha and Elsa told me the next day that Norris spent the entire amount on jewelry the three found piled in bins at the store's closeout counter. The manager brought more out to them as they spent two hours sorting. Norris intended to use the stones, charms, and jewels to make her own necklaces, earrings, and bracelets. Sam and Elsa also convinced Norris that she needed to return to a nearby consignment shop that also had high end clothing and jewelry for sale for huge discounts.

"I felt like a living Barbie doll," she laughed when she called me later that day from NYC. "The girls picked out jewels and clothes and made me try everything on. It was great! They spent two hours dressing me up."

In 2010, I saw her three last times. In August, I taught playwriting at the Mailer Center. Norris was in town to participate in several events—familial vacation, her own book reading at the Fine Arts Center, and several Mailer Colony Board meetings. Despite being ill and in pain, Norris missed no events that week, including a public reading by the playwriting student/scholars I had mentored at the Colony.

She asked if I would have a one-on-one dinner with her. "We need girl time," she said. "And I want to show you some of my jewelry."

I picked her up at her rented condo and we went to Mews and sat at the table she and Norman used to share. We spent the next four hours talking like old girlfriends. We shared motherly worries about our children, our hopes and dreams for them, some boyfriend stories, and more childhood memories.

At the book party for Kaylie Jones in NYC two years earlier, Norris asked me about my hometown. I told her that western PA and my family farm were much like her rural Arkansas that she depicts in her novel and memoir. Soon, we were giggling and appalling two of her "NYC friends" who eventually walked away as Norris and I talked about outhouses, butchering chickens and cows, and skinning minks and muskrats, or gutting freshly caught fish. I guess it was the reaction of those listening to us that we found so funny. Likely, we felt comfortable, for once, talking about our pasts, because we both had experienced the "imposter complex," that gnawing feeling that someone would discover our impoverished childhoods and take us out of the NYC scene she lived or the academic life I had found. I don't know; I only know we would immediately laugh whenever one of us said, "out-

house.” A silly inside joke. She told me Norman loved for her to tell those stories at fancy dinner parties and see similar discomfort from dinner guests while Norman grinned.

On that warm August month in P-town over dessert she never ate, I asked her about her jewelry. She proudly showed me her necklace and earrings that she wore and two sets she carried in her purse.

I asked her if I could commission her to make a set for Samantha for Christmas. We both cried when she told me she didn’t expect to see Christmas and explained why to me. As she did so, there was not a tinge of regret nor a morsel of self-pity in her voice about her situation. Instead, there was only worry and concern for the people she would leave behind. Motherhood and wifedom were not duties to Norris; they were a mantle she wore proudly wrapped around her shoulders, a “gift” that comforted her and nurtured her in the decades with Norman and the entire brood, a cloak that warmed her even in “bad times.” However, she likely would have said those days were far outweighed by the good times in all ways.

Finally, she looked at me and smiled, “Here, take these,” she said and handed me her earrings. “I’ve worn them three times. You wear them three times and give them to beautiful Sam. Tell her that she has both of us on her whenever she wears them. We will be there with her. Always.”

We left arm-in-arm and strolled back to the car. She pulled me into a shop. “They said they’d sell my jewelry. I love their clothes!” After talking to the manager a bit, Norris handed me a dark green jacket. “This looks like you,” she said.

She also saw the look on my face when I turned over the price tag. Well out of my price range. In typical Norris fashion, she took the jacket, smiled at me, and said, “You know there’s a better store down the street. They will have things that are . . . more your color.” We both laughed.

Then she asked if we could “drag Commercial Street,” and we did. “Dragging” was a play on words for cruising the street after dinner with Norman AND seeing the gay scene in P-town, she explained. She told me funny Norman stories of their drives down the street; she pointed out other places they had lived, eaten, and visited. Told me stories not in her memoir and others that were. Near midnight we sat in my car outside her condo. Just sat looking at a star-filled sky.

She asked me again about Samantha. Was the boy she was seeing the one? I said I believed so. Earlier, she had told me that John Buffalo was between

relationships at the moment. “Promise me, that if Sam’s fella doesn’t work out, you’ll introduce her to John Buffalo,” she said. She hugged me and went inside.

I saw Norris several more times in NYC after that night, but it is that late August evening that I remember when I think of her. A special dinner with someone who epitomized grace and courage in all that she did and faced. Someone who made me feel that I should never complain. About anything. Just accomplish something as well as I possibly could. Someone I was lucky enough to know as a friend and came to miss far too late. Norris.