

Growing Up In Gaithersburg

By Marien Helz

Something Happening

For a very long time, nothing ever happened in Gaithersburg. When you're three years old, things happen every day—every minute, even. You learn new words, see things you never saw before, meet new people daily. The world is a fascinating place. Three decades later, you're thirty-three, and you don't want things to happen. You've worked hard to establish a career or profession. You've studied; you've found that special person to go through life with or you've established a reliable circle of friends; very likely, you've brought children into the world whom you want to nurture and protect. Things happening is not what you're looking for. Ordinary life is exciting enough.



There's a point in between those years, however,

when all you want is for things to happen: someone to phone you, somewhere to go, some way to get there, someone to talk to, someone to tell your troubles to, new things to see, new people to meet. When you live in the kind of small country town that Gaithersburg was when I was growing up, *things* just don't happen. Before the sixth grade, fun could be playing horse and buggy or touch football in the big yard, having apple wars in the overgrown yard across the street that backed on Walker Avenue beside



Reggie Shirley's house, or taking long, long hikes through the woods that are now Lake Forest Mall. Sometime after sixth, seventh, or eighth grade, those amusements lost their allure. In high school, the world seems to close in on you. I figured out how to get my driver's license as soon after my sixteenth birthday as it was legally possible so that the edge of town would no longer be the edge of my world.



Driving wasn't really what changed Gaithersburg for me, however. After all, in order to drive, you have to have a car, and my parents were not the type to get cars for kids. You had to earn your own car which was not something that baby-sitting and paper route money would buy. The renewal for me was simply Gaithersburg's proximity to Washington DC. By the time I was in college, I was able to take advantage of the interesting things in DC—even scheduling my term papers so that I could write them all in the Library of Congress.

Coming from a small Ohio town, my mother had always appreciated the possibilities that Washington offered. She tried to make sure that each of her nieces and nephews had the opportunity to stay with us and see our nation's capitol. I had no idea of how good she was at being a tour guide until my cousin Linda came, and I went along when my mother showed her Washington. We were standing in

the Capitol Building outside a shop for congressmen and women. Senator Proxmire was in the shop, and my mother recognized him since she kept up on current events and legislation.

All I knew was that my fairly sedate mother started beaming at a complete stranger. I couldn't believe what was happening. Senator Proxmire appeared to be pulled out of the shop as though by a magnet from my mother's gaze. He came over to her extending his hand and in an even, mellow voice, said, "Hello. I'm Senator Proxmire from Wisconsin."



"Oh, we know you are! We know you are," was my mother's almost adoring response.

She wasn't even from his political party—although everyone liked Proxmire because he represented the citizens well.

"We hail from Wisconsin," my mother continued, which caused me to do a double-take.

"Well, my husband's family is," she elaborated.

She and the Senator continued chatting about some legislation that I wasn't up on. He guided us to the elevator and took us to the part of the gallery reserved for friends of Senators. Because she had wanted Linda to be able to observe either the House or the Senate in action, getting a gallery pass was what my mother had been interested in obtaining before she was waylaid by seeing Proxmire. I noticed that in other sections, people were only allowed a limited time and were ushered out to be replaced by another group. In our section, no one asked us to leave, and at one point Senator Edward Kennedy came into our gallery with a friend he brought.

We saw both Bobby and Ted Kennedy on the floor of the Senate that afternoon. Their suits made them stand out as though they were in color and everyone else in black and white.

Years before that, when I was still in high school, the subject of visiting Washington came up at dinner, and my father mentioned that some of my older cousins had visited in the forties. The two teenage boys rode in with my father, and were supposed to see DC during the day and meet him in the evening to ride home.

They decided that they wanted to tour the Naval Gun Factory. Only those with security ID tags could get in, but my cousins noticed that they all flipped their shirt pockets to show the badges. The boys walked in with the crowd, and flipped their pockets as though they had badges, walked around all day, and then left with the crowd in the evening, flipping their shirt pockets to show their non-existent IDs. This happened, my father said, during the war years when security was tight.

My father related this in an even, matter-of-fact tone. His tone was the thing about the story that startled me the most because I knew how much my father expected people to follow the rules unless they had a powerful and noble purpose for not doing so. It struck me that had my cousins been caught,



*Kamla and Sheenu,
Maryland Avenue, 1966*

it might have jeopardized my father's security clearance—yet, how could one not admire their verve.

On that occasion, my mother wouldn't have been able to show them around because she had toddlers at home. As time passed, and she could get away for a day more easily, my mother seemed to thrive on guiding people around the District, and sooner or later, everyone visited. Gaithersburg was far enough outside that the frenetic atmosphere of DC didn't impinge, but you could take advantage of everything the city offered.

My Greek college roommate stayed with us, as did her

mother when she was visiting our country from her home in Thessalonica. Friends of mine from graduate school, Kamla and Sheenu, were our houseguests too. Before I graduated from high

school, I realized that one of the best things about Gaithersburg was that even when it was a small farming village, the world passed by your door, and something was always happening.



Margarita, Eftihia, and Katie 1972