

# Dr. Barbara Joans R.I.P.



by Phyllis Chesler

And now, my darling friend of fifty-five years, Dr. Barbara Joans, has gone and died. True, she was ill for at least three years. True, she was eight-nine years old and she'd had a serious stroke—and yet, I cry out, and of course, I am grieving.

I refuse to remove her contact information from my various active lists. She will join so many others whose names I've

kept intact. It's my way of retaining some lingering contact, a way of visiting with them, remembering them still.

I've lost my first-ever feminist companion.

She is not the first feminist in my life to have died on me—but she was an utterly unique human being, a genuine non-conformist, fearless, loyal, accomplished, a bit of a wild woman. And that's before she started riding a Harley Davidson motorcycle together with her beloved husband, Ken.

We could never remember where or how we'd first met. She was living on Bedford Street in a commune. I was on West 13th St, also in the West Village. Together, we helped women obtain illegal abortions. Together, we tore the roof off the place when, in 1970, we'd lectured at the Great Neck Long Island Forum.

Barbara was the single, divorced mother of two sons, both under the age of five; she somehow managed to take care of them, work on her Ph.D. in Anthropology, and still attend meetings and demonstrations. Barbara took her share of psychedelics and, in an altered state, decided she would not continue her doctorate. Using all the love I had for her, I persuaded her to stick with her studies. And so she did.

She obtained her B.A. from Brooklyn College; her M.A. in Sociology and Anthropology from New York University; and her Ph.D. in Anthropology from City University of New York. She did a doctoral thesis about the Iroquois in Canada and a doctoral dissertation on "Women's Liberation Groups: Behavioral Anthropology."

Barabara moved to California, to "Frisco," as she would say—but also to Santa Cruz, and eventually, also to Alameda. The girl had real estate. She loved the wide blue sky and sea, the wind at her back on the road.

Barbara received numerous honors and awards. She was the

director of the Merritt Museum of Anthropology in Oakland and chairwoman of the Anthropology Department at Merritt College. She received numerous Teacher of the Year awards from Merritt College. She wrote an article about Law Schools and Anthropology and about Anthropology and Military Culture.

Barbara published a book titled, *Old Women in America—"I'm Young." She Lied*. She changed the title to "The Changing Woman, Women of a Certain Age."

But especially, most of all, in 2001 she published a book which remained in print for a long, long time. It was titled: *Bike Lust. Harleys, Women, and American Society*. Bikers became her tribe. She studied this tribe as if she was Margaret Mead in Samoa or New Guinea. Barbara understood all the contradictions involved in this particular subculture. It is also where she learned "not to shoot her mouth off," something she was very adept at doing. Here's what I said about it:

"Move over, Robert Pirsig and Hunter Thompson! Women are bikers, too, and Barbara Joans is one of them. *Bike Lust* shatters myths and introduces us to a new generation of 'gender traitor' bikers, many of whom are wives, mothers, lesbians, feminists, and anti-feminists. This is an inspired meditation. Barbara Joans, an anthropologist, has found her tribe and she loves them."

For years, she also wrote a column called "Bike Rest with BJ" for a free motorcycle rag called Thunderpress.

Here's Barbara, talking to a reporter from the SF Gate:

A: "Bike Lust" is about an American culture – the Harley-Davidson community in California. It's the only one I write about because I really am an anthropologist, and I write about groups I live among, work with, have participant-observation with. In the case of this community, I knew nothing about it when I started.

Q: How did you get into it?

A: My husband joined a HOG (Harley owners group). I started out on the back of his bike, and I fell in love with jamming the wind, the community. At the time I was 55, 56.

Q: How did you learn to ride?

A: I took a beginner's class. I was about 30 years older than everyone else, but it didn't matter. I went from a Honda Rebel when I was 56, to a Sportster at 58 to a Harley low-rider when I was 60.

This is what I meant by fearless, perhaps even reckless. I once asked her what she did when the bike fell over. Her answer: "Phyl, I just pick it up." "But Barb, the damn things weighs 679 pounds." "Yeah. Ya just gotta do it."

Dr. Barbara worked with me on a conference for the United Nations. I could not have found all the wonderful women invitees without her enormous assistance. She also stood by me when I raised the issue of sexual harassment and sexual assault at the UN, in general, and in a very personal way.

At a certain point, Barbara refused to call herself a feminist. She did not much like the direction our movement had taken. Nevertheless, in addition to her family, she had a wide range of friends, including transgender people, very straight people, conservatives, daughters-in-laws and grandbaby people; she was still friends with rabid feminists and pro-Israel advocates such as myself. She told me that her father was friends with the great Micky Marcus.

In the last 15-20 years, Barbara began calling me to discuss Torah and Jewish law. She had thousands of questions about God. Finally, in exasperation, I reminded her that I was not a rabbi and that she ought to bother one of them. And so she did. She really did. She found a rabbi in "Frisco," and one in Santa Cruz. Whatever they discussed must have led to her

decision to have an Orthodox Jewish rabbi officiate at her funeral. As we know Chabad rabbis work miracles.

For a long time, a severely disabled Barbara did not want to live. Her assisted living facility moved her into hospice care. Then, she decided that she *did* want to live after all. They moved her back.

My darling and irreplaceable friend was buried on Sunday, March 10th, in Santa Cruz. The service was conducted by Chabad rabbi Yochanan Friedman. I asked one of her sons, Howard Schwartz, what he might like me to say. Here are his words:

“The quote on Jackie Robinson’s headstone is very appropriate for my mom: ‘A life is not important except for the impact it has on other lives’ Barbara Joan’s had quite an impact on many lives during her time on this planet.”