

*The following essay first appeared in the Philadelphia Inquirer on August 24, 2006*

**“A Pooling of Life Stories: The Ebb and Flow of Friendships that are Formed by the Water”**

*by Claudia Beechman*

It was a glorious summer day, so I went swimming at the township pool. I've been a regular since the days when my two young sons would go with me. I'd swim laps and my 5-year-old would walk along the edge shadowing me until I finished my swim and he could ask me for snack money. Like most of the children they grew up with, the boys lost interest when they reached puberty and didn't want to be seen anywhere with their parents.

I noticed that most parents stopped going when their children did, but I continued to enjoy it, because I could swim laps there in the open air and because of the little group that sought shade under an enormous weeping willow tree. Sometime in the '90s (none of us remembers exactly when), the township cut the tree down, but we all kept returning to the same spot.

One of the regulars was Danica, who was born in Belgrade. A former hat model for designer Nina Ricci, she had a showroom in New York where she designed and sold furs. She once had her own pool in North Carolina; she talked about it often. After her husband died, she moved to Elkins Park to be near her son, who was a medical student at Temple University. When someone suggested she join the township pool, she was skeptical. But when she finally saw the sparkling water in its sylvan setting, her doubts disappeared.

Danica spoke English well (albeit with a strong Serbian accent), but preferred to speak French with me. We had met the previous winter at an informal gathering of French speakers. "Ca va?" (How's everything?) she would always ask. Over the years, we spent hours discussing everything from the boors she met at singles ballroom-dancing soirees to her pride at having become an American citizen. She was a woman of great style. True to her New York fashion connections, she always wore chic sunglasses, perfectly applied red lipstick, and one of her large collection of straw hats.

Other people overheard us chattering away, and soon we had quite a cosmopolitan group. Until then, I never knew that so many Europeans lived in the community. David, from Turkey, always wore his signature yellow baseball cap and loved to talk about classical music. Mirjam, a stained-glass artist from Switzerland, played games with her little

daughter, Manon. Gabe, a brilliant scholar from Greece, had been hit by a car. He was bent over and walked with a cane but he was always in the water and liked to flirt with the ladies.

Some of the group were born in the United States. There was Ruth, an actor who grew up in Brooklyn, and her husband Mort, a travel writer, actor and master of the bon mot. And Alma, Gabe's wife, who still has an uncanny ability to hear what someone is saying at the other end of the pool. Elayne, the mother of twin sons, takes belly-dancing lessons at the adult school.

One day, Danica and I struck up a conversation (in English) with Carolyn, a former DJ and singer. She would sit in the sun for long periods of time, but one day she astonished everyone by jumping into the water, doing 50 laps with the speed and stamina of an Olympic swimmer. She has a great figure, but no by-the-pool lounging suits for her. She wears a racer-back Speedo whether she swims or not.

Last year, Danica announced she was closing her showroom and moving to Nashville to be near her daughter. She had been talking about it for a while but no one ever thought she would really leave.

"The pool without Danica?" we asked each other. It didn't seem possible. At the end of the summer, Carolyn, Mirjam and I took her out to dinner. We went to a local Italian restaurant, where Danica presented us with fabric rosette pins she had made. Each one was different, distinctive and fashioned with infinite care. We proudly affixed them to our lapels and had our picture taken.

So here we all are, this summer, without Danica. Little by little, people have joined our group, and where the weeping willow once stood, new friendships have begun to grow.