

Arsaga

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was no turbulence at home, which allowed her to focus on and excel in school. Her test scores had always indicated that she was a bright student, but her difficult and tumultuous home life prevented her from following through on homework and projects consistently.

“For the first time in a long time, things in my life were stable,” she remembers. “Which was really nice for me. I felt sort of like a different person in that situation. I started to feel more socially involved and settled.”

The period of stability was heartbreakingly short — Mississippi, which had yet to integrate its schools, chose to do so in 1969, while Arsaga was living with her aunt. Her aunt unenrolled her own children and Arsaga from the public school system. But unlike her cousins, Arsaga was not enrolled in private school; her aunt couldn't afford to pay her tuition. So, at the end of the most calm, fulfilling nine months of Arsaga's life, she was sent back to her parents, where she stayed for another year before moving into her own apartment.

“I didn't realize it at the time, but people were watching out for me,” says Arsaga. “I had a guidance counselor who called me into her office after we had taken whatever tests that we were taking that year and asked me why my grades were so low [since] I had scored really high on the test. I didn't feel like I could really confide in anybody, but it occurred to me at that point that, ‘Oh, there is something going on here, and I really need to get out of this situation.’ So my principal helped me get a job at a furniture store where his wife worked, so I had money to pay the rent.”

ON HER OWN

Unheard of for most teens her age, this kind of independence — by 11th grade, Arsaga was completely responsible for supporting herself — was her normal, having grown up in extreme circumstances.

“By the time I got out of high school, I was ready for whatever was coming next,” she says. As it turns out, what was coming next was a marriage. “I got married really young, and that was probably not the best idea, but it allowed us to pool our resources and really do something.”

Arsaga and a tight-knit group of friends were ready for an adventure. Dawn Newman is one of Arsaga's oldest friends and was part of the group who joined the “back to the land” movement and went in search of a rural plot they could make their own.

“I heard about undeveloped land that could be had for cheap,” remembers Newman. “We all caravanned up to Northwest Arkansas in search of our Utopian vision. The Strout Realty agent in Harrison handed us several maps and told us to drive out in the back country and pick our favorite. These plots were a few of the hundreds being sold all over the Ozarks by the Broadhead Trust for \$75 an acre.”

“We bought what we thought was going to be an 80-acre tract, and it turned out to be 40,” says Arsaga, laughing. “People were buying land so quickly, it was so chaotic, they had already sold the 40 that was by the road. So we ended up with the 40 back in the forest.”

The group — three couples and a single man and his dog — built tents on raised platforms where they lived for around six months.

“Cindy and [her husband] Gary had the best tent,” says Newman. “It was just a tent, but it was the first of many of Cindy's residences where her eye for detail, design and placement created a warm and homey environment. She always felt that a clean floor and, in later residences, a vacuumed floor made for a great home in spite of any other shortcomings.”

The group stayed in the woods, in their temporary shelters, from May until October. The women in the group traveled to Fayetteville daily, where



NWA Democrat-Gazette/ANDY SHUPE

“Cindy was an incredible single mother. Providing financially, and for a great home life for Terra. In spite of all the challenges, she was able to put herself through nursing school. Her efforts did not end at her own door, as she became involved in making Fayetteville a better place.” — Dawn Newman

they all worked at Brough Commons, a cafeteria on the University of Arkansas campus. Just about the time the weather was starting to change, says Arsaga, they were saved from a miserable winter by a local man they had gotten to know.

“This wonderful old-timer came down the hill and told us we were going to freeze, and we should come stay with him,” says Arsaga. “He farmed — he had the house and a plow, and he grew a little marijuana in between his corn. The people out there were so unexpected. They were so fabulous. And they loved taking us out and showing us where to find wild bee hives and ginseng. They were so thrilled. Their kids had all moved to Springdale, they didn't want to live out there, so they took us in. One of my dearest friends for the rest of my life was a woman [named Hazel] who hired me to feed chickens during this time. She just mothered me and taught me to cook and how to make cornbread. I still make her cornbread recipe.”

“That was just an amazing time. Back then, you just flew by the seat of your pants, and stuff worked out.”

FINDING FAYETTEVILLE

Arsaga and her friends stayed with the good Samaritan through the winter and spring seasons, but, by the end of that time, the group had started to peel off, one by one.

“We were so young,” she says ruefully. “Everybody split up. Some moved back to Little Rock, some to Fayetteville. Everyone got divorced, eventually, and I ended up in Fayetteville with a child, because we had had a child as soon as we moved back here. But I kept going back out [to Madison County]. Those connections lasted a lifetime.”

Now a single mom, Arsaga was determined to make a good life for her daughter, Terra. She says she took advantage of the social safety net programs the Jimmy Carter administration had put in place at the time, including a tuition program that allowed her to enroll in college.

“I applied for everything that was available, because I didn't have any family support, nowhere to get money,” she says. “I had a work-study job and another job in a restaurant — first it was Working Class Hero, which was just above Hugo's, kind of where we had our first coffee shop, and then the next place I worked was Restaurant on the Corner [on Dickson] which, for years, was the place where everybody worked and hung out.”

It was at ROTC that she met her husband, Cary.

“He was a friend of a guy that I had been dating, and he came in with him while I was working the cash register,” she says. “He came and paid for his meal, and I looked up at him and saw his eyes and I thought, ‘OK, that's it. He has beautiful eyes.’ It was an immediate connection;

it was amazing.”

“My first impression [of Cindy] was that she had a very noticeable walk,” says Cary. “When I went to pay my bill at the counter, our eyes connected, and I knew I was going to ask her out.”

“We went to the UARK Bowl, that's where everyone went to dance, back in the day,” says Cindy Arsaga. “That was our first date.”

The “immediate connection” led to marriage, and over the next decade, Arsaga would have two more children and earn a nursing degree at the University of Arkansas. She got a job at City Hospital in Fayetteville, where she worked as a surgical nurse. She discovered that the unique stress that accompanied such a high-stakes job was something she handled better than others.

“I think because I lived under a lot of pressure as a kid,” she says.

Arsaga would work as a nurse for around 13 years. She and Cary traded off periods of time when one or the other would stay home when the kids were babies. Cary taught math briefly, but the wages were so low that Arsaga says the family qualified for free lunch when he taught. He moved to working for Cooper Communities, a developer in Bella Vista.

“He was pretty burned out, and I was staying at home with the kids at the time,” says Arsaga. “So we said, ‘What would you want to do? What could we do?’ And we spent a lot of time asking that question.”

Cary had visited friends in Boulder, Colo., and had fallen in love with a coffee shop there.

“We saw another place in Kansas City that we made a connection with, and he came home one day and said, ‘I think I want to open a coffee house,’ and I said, ‘Let's do it!’” says Arsaga. “By that time, we were living in Bentonville, and I was working as a nurse. When we started, we couldn't get any loans from anybody, so our family loaned us a little money, some friends loaned us some money, we had some credit cards, and we just started doing it.”

COFFEE CRAZED

The couple was at the beginning of the wave that would bring the coffee house craze. The Arsagas didn't realize it yet, but they had hit upon a genius idea.

Arsaga says the project energized Cary, and his energy was infectious. When he came home every day excited about what he was working on, she decided she wanted a piece of that excitement, too. In a leap of faith, she quit her nursing job. They went all in.

“It was good, though, because I'm the one who thought about tables and chairs,” she says, laughing. “We wouldn't have had plates or cups. ‘Oh, we need some cups! How do we get those?’ At the time, there was no Internet, no Google, no personal computers, so I just started making phone calls and doing research. I ordered so much chocolate from Ghirardelli — the min-

imum order requirement was pretty high — we had to store it in our garage in Bentonville. We just totally winged it.

“We were interested in creating a place that was about community, and that seemed to be what was happening in coffee houses,” she continues. “That just resonated with both of us. A coffee house was as good a way as any to engage in that and probably better than a lot of other options because it was so accessible.”

Once opened, their first coffee shop — located on Block Street, just off the Fayetteville square — was an instant hit. Nearly immediately, it became a social hub — the warm, inviting and artistic interior combined with the fragrant air was irresistible.

Artist Kathy Thompson, a longtime friend of Arsaga's, met the new business owners when she was enlisted to design the interior of the second coffee house the couple opened, on Gregg Avenue.

“Craig Young, an incredible woodworker, was helping with the shop,” says Thompson. “They were talking one day and Craig said, ‘Well, I had a dream last night that Kathy Thompson helped you.’ It's so typical of all of us. That's how our friendship started.

“A large part of the success of their coffee shops is because of the way they look and the way that people feel when they're in them. I think that's a big draw,” Thompson says.

“Cindy now does all of that with her kids. They spend a lot of time talking about the vision of each place. And I think that's one of the reasons their businesses have been so popular.”

“Her talents involved taking ordinary spaces and transforming them into works of art,” says Cary. “People would come into our coffee houses, and you could tell they were taken by what she had created inside. ... The spaces were always inviting, interesting and places where you would want to bring a friend because you felt like you were sitting in a work of art that was warm and embracing.

“We have the coffee houses we have because of my initiative, but they have heart because of Cindy.”

The initial success spurred expansion fairly quickly, although Arsaga says that was not their original intention. In quick succession, they opened Gregg Avenue and Crossover Road locations, followed by a bakery. An attempt to slow down a bit in 2009 found them selling a few locations, but, today, they seem to have let their feet off of the brakes. In addition to Arsaga's coffee houses inside the Fayetteville Public Library and the University of Arkansas Law Department, they opened Arsaga's at The Depot in 2012 — a full-service, popular restaurant — and, in 2016, they returned to their roots on the square with Arsaga's at Church and Center, a concept coffee house conceived by daughter Ava. More

THROUGH OTHERS' EYES

Cindy Arsaga

■ “Unfortunately, Cindy didn't have a great role model for motherhood. She was an only child in a household where both parents were alcoholics, and domestic violence was a real and disturbing part of her early childhood years. It's not uncommon to have that pattern continue to the next generation. Cindy broke that cycle. She's not only been a loving and caring mother, but she is the glue that holds this family together.”

— Cary Arsaga

■ “She's a really great listener and a really great brainstormer. That's what we do, we talk. We brainstorm. We figure out our lives. She's just a very loving person. It's is so wonderful to have a friend like Cindy. Not only can we do all of those things together, but we work together, too. It really is nice. Sometimes I'm not always easy, but she just loves me really well, and I know her and we just ignore those things and go on our way. I think Cindy will always be my friend. And I think that's not always true of friendships, especially when you get older.”

— Kathy Thompson

■ “She has been really instrumental about voicing all of the positive things that were going on on campus and being a real ally in the community, and helping us change from having a [strictly] academic mission on campus to having a role in the community. Her voice and input and advice on engaging the community has been invaluable.”

— Jeannie Hulen, interim director of the UA School of Art

recently, they announced plans to take over the building that once housed the Greenhouse Grille on South School Avenue.

“It is a total surprise,” says Arsaga of her 25 years in business. “I still can't quite believe it.

“We care a lot about people. We never thought, ‘Oh, we'll open 10 stores’ or ‘We'll go national.’ That was not, in any way, what we were interested in. I think the focus for us was so much more personal, and I think people responded to that. It's always been that way, at all of our places. And now our kids are helping us, and Cary's sister just moved here from Boston. Our family is really involved. It evolves. The only thing I know is that it has its own life, and you kind of have to get out of the way and let it happen.”

HEART AND ART

Arsaga's focus on people is also demonstrated by the community involvement she has shown in Northwest Arkansas over the last 25 years.

“She's got so much access to the community,” says Jeannie Hulen, acting director of the UA School of Art. “She's involved in the community on so many levels. The Arsaga's legacy in this town is really phenomenal and really valuable to who we are in Fayetteville.”

Hulen asked Arsaga to serve on an advisory board she created to help steer the direction of the university's art department, because, at the same time Arsaga was becoming one of the most popular entrepreneurs in Fayetteville, she was also reconnecting with her own artistic side, something she credits Thompson for kick-starting. Art has always been a love of hers, and among her good memories of her father were their trips to Frederika's Pharmacy in Little Rock to pick up paint-by-number sets. The first Arsaga's location seemed a natural place to show local art, a practice the Arsagas continue to this day.

Arsaga would have the first public showing of her own art at the Crossover location. After experimenting with several mediums over the years, she has settled into a process that she loves called encaustic painting. The ancient process dates back to the 5th century and involves adding colored pigments to heated beeswax. Arsaga's pieces include altered photographs that she took herself and are moody, mysterious and enchanting. Since her first public show, she's gained national prominence, with several of her pieces displayed at the Encaustic Art Institute in Santa Fe. She's also been chosen three times as an artist for the Arkansas Delta Exhibition, a highly competitive juried show.

“It wasn't easy, and it was a struggle for me a lot of the time, but if you want something bad enough, it happens,” she says of her return to art. “And I think it was waiting for me to grab hold of it.”

Moving forward, Arsaga says the family is fairly

bubbling over with ideas right now — some of them, like the new space on South School, have been announced, while the details of others are somewhat under wraps until plans are more firmly in place.

“There's so much going on, Fayetteville is just blowing up, and we're really involved in a lot of those things,” she says. “We love the south end of town because it still feels like Fayetteville, and we're hoping a lot of that can be nurtured and maintained. There's lots to do.” She says any future plans using existing buildings will follow the same rule of thumb they used when renovating The Depot: retain as much of the character as possible instead of hollowing out the charm. “I love that that building is still there, and that you can tell what it was when you walk in. We're really into trying to help those places stick around.”

In the end, Arsaga's comments always come back to the reason she and Cary started their business in the first place — for the community.

“For me, [Fayetteville] provided a home that I didn't have,” she says. “It was such an inclusive community when we all came here. I think Fayetteville must have been that all along. I've been reading Charlie Alison's *A Brief History of Fayetteville* and I love it, because it kind of confirms to me that this is what this place has always been.

“I think it's magical. There's definitely a bit of magic here.” And if that's true, Cindy Arsaga is certainly responsible for some of that magic herself.

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NORTHWEST ARKANSAS Democrat Gazette

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