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Printed on page A10

Lifetime filled with detours

By BARBARA PETERS SMITH

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Nancy Schlossberg's life has been brushed by momentous political and cultural events. But for some reason it's what doesn't happen that continues to fascinate her.

Talk to her about her role as an early cheerleader for Sarasota's Institute for the Ages (she now chairs its board); about her academic cred as the originator of Schlossberg's Transition Theory (you can Google it); about her long and exciting marriage to prominent labor lawyer Stephen Schlossberg (he passed away in 2011; she misses him deeply). And she will give you lots to think about.

But there's one topic she keeps coming back to, this idea that won't let go. Her dignified, even regal face softens into a kind of reverie when she mentions it.

The psychologist and retired professor, 85 and living in downtown Sarasota, calls the phenomenon a "non-event": that thing you expected in your life that never transpired.

It's the nothing that can change everything, like not marrying your hometown sweetheart, not getting a raise or promotion, not becoming a grandparent. It can be as devastating as losing a loved one or having cancer, Schlossberg says, but it's often a private pain.

"People don't bring you chicken soup, because you don't advertise your non-event," she says.

Take, for example, her own sacrifice for her husband's career, with a 1963 move to Detroit -- decidedly not where she had envisioned starting married life.

The Barnard College graduate had fallen in love with Stephen Schlossberg when he came to New York as a federal mediator in the 1962 newspaper strike. Labor Secretary Willard Wirtz joked that the strike took so long to settle because of their courtship.

She married, moved to Washington, D.C., and found work she enjoyed at Howard University. Suddenly her new husband was offered the job of a lifetime: legal counsel to the United Automobile Workers, working directly with famed labor leader Walter Reuther.

In Detroit.

She would bring up two children there, and flourish as an outspoken champion for women's rights at Wayne State University -- but not until she got over being paralyzed by the turn her life had taken.

"I didn't know who I was," she remembers. "I took a course in sculpting and flunked. I thought my life was over."

If she expected Steve Schlossberg to coddle her, she was mistaken.

"He said, 'You know, Nancy, you have so many inner resources; I can't believe you

can't figure this out.' I was so mad at him," she says.

'Widow in waiting'

But she did figure it out, and found a calling in the emerging field of adult development, studying how people change when they're supposed to be all grown up. After 10 years, she was granted her wish to return to Washington -- where her husband would become a Reagan administration "wild card" as deputy undersecretary of Labor -- and then she wondered why the move didn't immediately make her happier.

"I asked myself, 'What is it about transitions that I need to understand?'" she recalls. When she landed a faculty post at the University of Maryland, "that was my first study, on geographical moving."

From then on, every time she faced another transition, she found a book in the experience, including two about the retirement years in Sarasota. That generated her fervor for the Institute for the Ages, a spinoff of the community group SCOPE -- Sarasota County Openly Plans for Excellence.

"I wanted to bring aging specialists to town and just get more awareness of the field here," she says. "If I miss anything about my former life, it's the intellectual stimulation."

Schlossberg helps with the institute's new lecture series, while toying seriously with the idea of a book about this phase of her life.

The book's first half, she says, would describe her time as a "widow in waiting," mourning her loss but curious about what came next. The second would analyze her dating adventures.

"I could be a standup comedian, with some of the things that happened," she says. The hunt for romance ended online with Ron Grossman, 88, a retired attorney who lives in Palm-Aire. Their first date was for lunch at Marina Jack. That blossomed into trips to the Outer Banks, the Adirondacks and Costa Rica.

"There's a whole group of women my age who aren't interested in men at all; that's the last thing they care about," she says. "Each person's transition in old age is different."

Their relationship, she adds, is "very easy, very different from Steve."

Marriage is a step they are not considering.

"Absolutely not," she says. "My kids would have a fit and so would his. But this is nice. He walks straight, he drives at night, and I think he takes one pill."

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