

## **The Branson Bash of 1999**

*Linda Wheeler Donahue*

The Branson Bash of 1999 was truly extraordinary. After an exhausting 12-hour day of strain and overexertion from air and ground travel, my physical capacities should have been totally depleted. But I was just too plain excited to feel the fatigue as I lunged my Quickie over an unfriendly little lip in the doorway of the Motel Six.

It was 6 PM on Thursday, May 20, 1999. I planned to arrive one day early to rest in preparation for the weekend of activity. As my companion, John, and I entered the motel lobby, we could hear spirited conversation and enthusiastic laughter coming from the lobby. My adrenaline surged. I just knew these were the voices of my SJU Listmates.

As I met each of the Branson Buds, it was akin to being reunited with a dear friend, or a beloved next-door neighbor who regrettably moved away, but there was one slight variance. I had never seen this person.

I never laid eyes on them. I did not know their eyes softened in the corners giving way to a wide warm smile; did not know their speech pattern was soft and sweet, or their voice soared and boomed with transports of delight; did not know they love to wear their western belt buckle; did not know they used that kind of scooter/wheelchair/crutch/cane/ or caliper; did not know they lowered their eyes in shyness; did not know they were such a good listener; did not know they giggle at the drop of a hat; did not know they would clasp me tight with an enveloping, affectionate hug to end all bear hugs.

I knew none of that.

But I did know what was in their heart. I already knew that because we are Listmates. We share much more depth and intimate detail of our lives than we do with some hometown friends we see every day. We share our attitudes about everything and anything. We share our vulnerability. We are Listmates. Polio is our common denominator, but the Internet is what gets the credit for this accelerated interpersonal phenomenon.

This quickened process is the inversion of the standard socializing

pattern. Usually we get to know the physical aspects of a person as the first step. We see them, hear them, we observe their appearance and all the heavy-laden messages imbedded there . . . we surmise their occupation, their socio-economic position, their style; we appraise the mask they present to the world.

Then, if we ever get beyond those physical characteristics, and often we don't, we begin to know their mind, their attitudes, their opinions, maybe their hopes and dreams. The last in this usual getting-to-know-you scenario is becoming acquainted with what is in the heart. That's the way I think of the "friendship process". If I reach a point of honest self-disclosure, and reciprocal disclosure follows; that is, if we both decide to take that risk, I am on my way to making a friend. But this step comes last. All the other measures come first.

Now back to the 1999 Branson Bash. In this situation, we forced the sociological archetype to mutate. Because we leaped ahead to the final step in the pattern, that of knowing what is in each other's hearts, the omitted steps seemed trivial and surprisingly unimportant. So what if he has bright orange hair and I never liked redheads. It just does not matter in this instance. I like the way he thinks, I respect the way he feels. I ignore the offending physical characteristic that may have proven to be an insurmountable barrier if we were using the old prototype of getting acquainted.

Through our Internet association, we really connected. We already knew so much about each other that there was no need for the "ice breaker" game I was in charge of leading. There was no ice to break. We were sailing in warm waters from the moment we read one another's nametag.

I reeled from this awe-inspiring experience for many months after I returned to Connecticut as the experience washed over me in rhythmic waves. It vastly exceeded my expectations. This experience was incomparable to anything I've ever experienced in this wild and wacky life.

Wish you were there.

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