

The Good Life



One year after the death of a beloved Cambridge activist, a fellow wayfarer reflects on the dreams of a generation



A ghost bike (facing page) marks the spot where Marcia Deihl was killed on March 11, 2015.

Deihl was a founding member of the New Harmony Sisterhood Band, started in 1973 by students at the Goddard-Cambridge Graduate School for Social Change.

**of
Marcia
Deihl**

by Susan Seligson

*“Shake hands
with your
choices,
sit back,
and enjoy
the ride.”*

—MARCIA DEIHL

YEARS AGO, AT MY FIRST NEWSPAPER JOB, when the notion of our own death was a distant abstraction, my young colleagues and I amused ourselves by composing headlines for our obituaries. All that we imagined our lives would be has now, four decades later, been rewritten by reality and steered by opportunities, obligations, and fate. Those of us who were the product of that postwar tidal wave known as the baby boom entered a world of unprecedented possibility. We thought of ourselves as rebels and nonconformists, as we agitated, reveled, and otherwise communed in lockstep. We harbored grandiose dreams—we would change the world.

Today, BU’s boomer alumni include leaders and luminaries in the humanities, the arts, business, and medicine, and we celebrate them here. But as many in my generation approach the end of our working lives, we wonder: what has made our lives meaningful? In a culture that increasingly rewards ambition and feeds on fame for its own sake, what does it mean to live a good life? Is there something we can still learn from those who, defying categorization and trailing no lofty credentials, succeed in a soulful, quirky way in making the world a slightly better place?

Consider Marcia Deihl, a Cambridge singer, writer, and activist, who died one year ago, on March 11, 2015, at the age of 65. Here are two photos, bookends of a tumultuous generation: in one, Deihl (DGE’69, CAS’71), circa 1979, in a long skirt, brown hair cascading from a newsboy cap, flashes a *Mona Lisa* grin as she poses with a battered VW Beetle. It’s a photo that people my age—61—recognize. In the second photo, taken in 2015 in front of a swirly Sol LeWitt canvas at MASS MoCA, the smile is broad, confident, and contagious, the now-silver hair separated girlishly in multiple braids. This is the image that accompanied reports of her death, notices that drew scores of comments from friends and admirers. Her death happened in an instant: riding her bike home from Whole Foods in Cambridgeport at 1:30 in the afternoon, she was struck by a dump truck on Putnam Avenue. The bike, a three-speed she had festooned with streamers and paper flowers, was her SUV—“simple utilitarian vehicle”—which she used to navigate the city she loved and that loved her back.

Deihl never stopped asking questions. She kept a diary for more than 50 years, recording her doubts and joys and worries. Her diaries, and her papers on women’s music, will reside in the archives of the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe.

If Deihl strived, her humanity

"Tell me," Mary Oliver, one of Deihl's favorite poets, wrote, "what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

Deihl sought answers. She graduated from BU with a degree in music history and education, and became neither famous nor rich. On the surface, her life was not what many might consider enviable. Her legion of friends and acquaintances were stunned by the profound wrongness of her sudden passing. A few of her songs live on in a recording by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, the nonprofit label of the Smithsonian Institution. Deihl's papers on women's music, and the diaries she wrote in every day for more than 50 years, will reside in the archives of the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe. The ruminations reflect the fertile minds of a generation of seekers

looking for meaning in ways that seemed strange, reckless, even worrying to many of their parents.

"She knows there's no success like failure, and that failure's no success at all."

Bob Dylan wasn't that many years beyond puberty when he wrote these lyrics to "Love Minus Zero/No Limit." But he was on to something—the tug of war between expectation (ours and others') and what we accomplish, and what makes us, artists or not, fully formed.

Her late '70s diaries lay bare the pressure Deihl felt to succeed. In the decades after she left BU, where I, too, honed my ambitions as a College of Communication graduate student in journalism, she established herself locally as a feminist activist, folksinger, composer, and writer, as well as a big, bright personality. If she strived, her humanity never suffered for it. She was an agitator everyone could adore, navigating her causes with what she called "the Trojan Horse of humor." She loved Zippy the Pinhead, gospel, and union hymns, performing on guitar and mandolin in groups with names like the New Harmony Sisterhood Band, the Bunker Hillbillies, the Oxymorons, and the Raisinettes. (New Harmony Sisterhood, disbanded in the late 1980s, reunited at BU in March 2014 for a performance at the College of Arts & Sciences conference A Revolutionary Moment: Women's Liberation in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s.) Deihl's friends recall how, upon request, she could do a solo three-part round by simultaneously humming, whistling, and playing a recorder through her nose. Her letters to the editor were fixtures on the *Boston Globe* editorial page. For decades she hosted annual "bizarre song parties," some of which live on in amateur YouTube videos, where talented grownups would belt out, say, the theme to the *Bob Newhart Show*. She sang in the choir at the progressive Old Cambridge Baptist Church.

ONLINE:

Listen to a 1981 recording of Marcia Deihl singing "I'm Settled" at a New Harmony reunion concert at Harvard's Paine Hall at bu.edu/bostonia.

Friends remember lugging furniture as Deihl (center) migrated from one rental apartment to another, but they also remember when she received a royalty check for \$500 and gave the money away.

LIVING OUT HER OWN DEEP CENTER

DEIHL GREW INTO HERSELF AS SHE BATTLED THE inequalities around her as well as her own demons, self-doubt, and unrealized dreams. She was frustrated by, and ultimately embraced, austerity, the limited reach of her art, and the humbling realities of her requisite day job as a secretary at Harvard's Tozzer Library. She took the job in the early '80s to pay the bills, and ended up working there for 30 years, taking a buyout less than 5 years before her death.

She witnessed, without judgment, many former fellow foot soldiers abandon their ideals. But by all accounts she never compromised hers. "Marcia was an energizing force in Cambridge for all that I hold dear, actively pursuing peace and justice with dedication and grace," singer Patty Larkin wrote on Facebook. "She was also very funny."

Her friends included theologian Harvey Cox, Jr., Harvard's Hollis Research Professor of Divinity Emeritus, who says Deihl reflected a rare combination of unflinching principles and mischievous wit. "I never knew anyone like her," he says. Cox treasures memories of the many lunches they shared at Harvard. "She was totally sui generis. She would've made a great old lady."

"She was totally sui generis. She would

"She lived out of her own deep center," says Mary Elizabeth Moore, dean of the BU School of Theology, who never met Deihl, but was intrigued by the tributes. "She had a sense of who she was, and had the will and courage to live out of it, which included the courage to do things differently from what many other people did."

Like all people who leave the world a better place, Deihl "had a deep sense of values beyond herself," Moore says, pointing to her activism and the stands she took on, for example, transgender rights long before it was popular to do so. Deihl was proudly bisexual (her essay "Biphobia," coauthored with Robyn Ochs, was published by Routledge in the 2000 collection *Getting Bi: Voices of Bisexuals around the World*). She helped found a Harvard-based lesbian and bisexual women's group called Sisters of Agnes. Even with her small salary, she was a regular donor to MassEquality in its battle for gays' right to marry. One of her great loves was a male-born transgender person with whom she created a scrapbook—it survives, along with her diaries—of poems, songs, and gleeful, celebratory cartoon art. "I was never a girly girl with a secret dress-up life," she once wrote. "But my old boyfriend was."

Deihl worked hard, reminding herself in her diary, though, that the job "didn't matter," and always her wit and exuberance prevailed. She collected her paychecks, and long after her peers were shackled with mortgages, she migrated from rental apartment to rental apartment. Her friends have memories of lugging furniture up and down stairs all over Cambridge. But they also recall the time she received an unexpected \$500 royalty check for a documentary film's use of her group's ver-



have made a great old lady."



sion of the Woody Guthrie song “Union Maid”—and gave the money away.

In January 1985 Deihl summed up her priorities for the year, which read like a blueprint for the rest of her life: “Spiritual: Pretend this is the only day. Artistic: Includes political and sexual. Career: Don’t get fired, pay bills.”

What are the ingredients to a life lived well? A healthy sense of irony, for one. In late middle age, Deihl updated her best-known song, “I’m Settled,” written in her 20s, with the refrain (“no husband no house no car no kid, no remorse about what I didn’t or did”), to “I’m Settling,” in which she jokingly bemoans her sagging body parts. In an essay published posthumously by WBUR’s *Cognoscenti*, titled “Message to My Younger Self,” she addresses a twenty-something with big dreams, someone who cringed when forced to list “secretary” as her occupation, and she concludes, “It turned out just fine.”

ONLINE:

Watch a video of Marcia Deihl and others from the New Harmony Sisterhood Band performing at A Revolutionary Moment: Women’s Liberation in the Late 1960s and Early 1970s, a 2014 conference organized by BU’s Women’s, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program, at bu.edu/bostonia.

For those of us of her vintage, the *Cognoscenti* essay begs the question, did we become too fixated on job titles, awards, the string of degrees after our names? On the cusp of the age in which the first question at a party is “What do you do?” Deihl often yearned to define herself, her friend Pam Cham-

berlain says. “She was always trying to discover who and what she was.”

ALWAYS HUNGRY

DEIHL WAS BORN IN NORTH CAROLINA TO A PASTOR who moved his family to a small town in upstate New York, where the neighbors were not amused by her antics, like walking her friend around in a dog collar and leash. In the posthumous *Cognoscenti* essay, Deihl reminisced about how in public school she had “both the highest IQ and the highest weight” in her class. She fought, and for the most part won, her lifelong battle with obesity. “I love being unfat,” she wrote in her 30s. She was, as her friends put it, always hungry—for food, for love, and for justice. She found kindred spirits at a politically and socially percolating BU, where she studied classical harpsichord, but was more drawn to the history of women and music.

To Robert Neville, dean of Marsh Chapel from 2003 to 2006, who learned about Deihl after her death, her life embodies the great gift of a true education in the humanities. An STH professor of theology and a College of Arts & Sciences professor of philosophy and religion, Neville says people who have studied the humanities often “speak up for the good life

as opposed to the successful life. There are all sorts of pressures in the university to measure success in college by the job you get afterward. But fulfillment doesn’t mean being rich. Most of us say the good life is something that isn’t to be measured in that way. It’s about finding what your talents are, discovering the



COURTESY OF DEBORAH SILVERSTEIN

problems on your watch, and learning to live within modest means.”

Back in the day, they called it “the People’s Republic of Cambridge,” and the city and Deihl were a perfect fit. In vintage fedoras, with guitar in hand, she was eager to lend her voice to the pro-union chorus and to step in line in a vigorous women’s movement that created the Cambridge Women’s Center by occupying an abandoned building near Harvard Square and winning local support that helped them buy another building on Pleasant Street. Deihl embraced a Cambridge that would in many ways be unrecognizable today. The women’s bars, the Marquee in Cambridge, Sneakers in nearby Somerville—gone. Club 47 had already moved from Mt. Auburn Street to Palmer Street and changed its name to Passim, where Deihl would share the bill with better-known acts like Patty Griffin.

She remained, politically and creatively, a locavore, venturing beyond Cambridge only to visit family or perform at women’s music festivals in the Midwest. On Facebook, she chronicled in photographs the demise of mom-and-pop businesses in Inman Square. “She acted in the place where she was, which is really powerful,”

“These are good days,” Deihl wrote in

observes Moore. Her longtime close friend Robyn Ochs, editor of *Bi Women Quarterly*, says Deihl often summed up the crazy quilt of her talents this way: “I’m an odd-ist.” When they met, Ochs was shocked to learn that Deihl had written her favorite song, “I’m Settled.” And Deihl was thrilled when she found out that Ochs was

the niece of folk icon Phil Ochs. Deihl had worked for a time at the now-legendary Rounder Records, where Ochs had recorded before his rise to fame. His earnest early songs, such as “When I’m Gone,” are now haunting anthems to the few who like Deihl lived them to their last day:

*All my days won't be dances of delight when I'm gone
And the sands will be shifting from my sight when I'm gone
Can't add my name into the fight while I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here*

Moore regards Deihl’s as “a full-bodied life.” She says that “our lives are not necessarily full when we make vast sums of money, or headlines, or wield great influence or power. Our lives are full when we tend to every dimension of our humanhood, interacting with the natural world, with friends, tending to the precious details of our lives.” Her words recall those of Howard Thurman (Hon.’67), dean of Marsh Chapel from 1953 to 1965, the first black dean at a mostly white American university. “Don’t ask what the world needs,” he said. “Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

Deborah Belle, a CAS professor of psychological and brain sciences and a contemporary of Deihl’s, reminds us that boomers came of age in an economy that was more robust than today’s, one with fewer pressures to repay college loans or rush toward financial independence. Still, she says, “I think that at the end of the day, much that is touted as the appropriate goals of life are unsatisfying.” Belle says research suggests that people who focus on materialistic values are less happy than others, and it shows a disturbing shift toward the materialistic.

“I think what is ultimately fulfilling in life are close, confiding relationships over time and the sense of doing good in the world for our communities, for the planet, for each other, and for the disempowered among us,” says Belle. People like Deihl spend the greater part of their time moving what Belle calls “that moral arc” in the direction of “an agenda that you value with every cell in your body.” And, she adds, “so much of this is absolutely joyful.”

A HIGH STANDARD OF TRUTH

“FRIENDS MOURN FOR CAMBRIDGE SONGWRITER, activist,” read the headline of the *Boston Globe* obituary, which mentioned that Deihl “had embarked upon retirement with joy that she could finally dedicate all her time to her art.” But what was it about Deihl that made her, as WBUR producer Kelly Horan puts it,

In the 1980s, Deihl was drawn to the Old Cambridge Baptist Church on Mass Ave. Harvey Cox preached often from its progressive pulpit, and the church was long established as a center of protest in the civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, and women’s movements, and refugees from Latin America, Africa, and other regions found sanctuary there. It also welcomed gays, lesbians, and other sexual minorities. In 1983 it beckoned to Deihl and her values, and its choir to Deihl, the lover of hymns. But as an agnostic who held herself to a high standard of truth, she felt torn about becoming a member, Cox says. “She got drawn to this church because of its reputation for social activism and racial justice,” he said.

“As a minister’s daughter, she loved gospel songs, and the whole feeling of being part of the church, but she just couldn’t believe any of it.” He recalls soothing her doubts. “She didn’t want to be hypocritical, and I would say, ‘Look, Marcia, Christianity is not about what you believe; it’s about how you live.’ So she decided to join the church.”

Deihl’s diary for 2015 remains in the possession of the Cambridge police, who have kept her backpack from the accident scene as evidence. But late in 2014, just a few months before she was killed, she wrote, “These are good days. I love the shape of them.”

“I looked back and forth like a cartoon ping pong match from my expense sheet to the pension they were offering me,” she wrote in her last essay for WBUR. “What? Could it be? Yes! I could do it. I could write and make music and support myself. So I was an artist. I was the turtle who won the race in the end! But when I looked around, no one was racing with me, toward status or life itself. The ‘them’ that I wanted to show had probably been through as many reversals as I had. I already had a useful and happy life.”

On April 25, 350 people gathered at the Cambridge YWCA for Deihl’s memorial service. The New Harmony Sisterhood Band reunited for the event, and Deborah Silverstein, who had cofounded the band with Deihl when they were in their early 20s, composed a song.

*She was witty and feisty,
stood up to the mean and mighty,
a rebel with a cause,
she wasn't in it for the applause.
No not the applause.*

At the dedication for Deihl’s ghost bike, friends sang “This Little Light of Mine.” Rev. Betsy Sowers, Old Cambridge Baptist Church pastor, read the eulogy. “We gather in grief to remember a life well lived, and a song beautifully sung,” Sowers said. “We praise you for the

life of Marcia...we give thanks for the fierce beauty of her life and the depths of her commitment to make this world a little kinder, a little more just.”

The ghost bike, painted white, still leans against a light pole on Putnam Avenue. The flowers in its basket are always fresh.

Deihl's words recall those of former Marsh Chapel Dean Howard Thurman, who encouraged all to "Ask what makes you come alive."

late 2014. “I love the shape of them.”

“mesmerizing—someone who embodied the notion of inner beauty?”

“She did things in her own unique way, and she was such an authentic person that she was probably more influential than her public profile might indicate,” says Moore.