

An Interview with Virginia Barnes Grogean, M.D., UMaine, 1963 at Surry, Maine 2022

If one wants to know how successful, long-term relationships can emerge from a blind date fraught with differences of opinions on all sorts of subjects, you might want to ask UMaine 1963 classmate Virginia Barnes Grogean, M.D.

Gina, as she prefers to be called, was in New Jersey in April 1969 for a party, a month or so in advance of a May wedding where she would be the maid of honor for a UMaine friend and sorority sister. The wedding couple had found Gina a blind date for the party, but they had invited the groom's best man, Tom, for dinner before the party. After an enjoyable dinner, Tom left to pick up his date for the party.

During a recent interview, Gina laughed out loud as she recalled, "Tom's date was classy, stylish, and had a French twist hairdo and I doubted I had attracted his attention." But there was a knock on the apartment door early the next morning when the same Tom invited her to ride with him to the shore to inspect a sailboat the two guys and another friend were looking to buy. "During that ride, we picked up where we had left off at dinner sharing interests: family, sailing, music, singing, travel, and more."

She calls the May wedding day, "our second date," as being lots of fun and the time he first met her parents. But it wasn't until August when she began a 3-month rotation in pediatric anesthesia in Philadelphia that she and Tom met again. During this time, they were able to get together on the Jersey shore for sails aboard the boat the men had purchased, to see Tom's fantastic Seabright, NJ apartment, and to enjoy a bit of Philadelphia. For the following nine months, Eastern Airlines provided a \$15 shuttle between Boston, where Gina was completing her anesthesia residency, and Tom, who was working at Bell Labs in Holmdel, New Jersey as a member of the technical staff. The next July 4th, 1970, her residency completed, Gina and Tom Grogean were married.

Fifty-two years and two sons later, "our differences remain and have provided challenges, particularly every four years when our votes have frequently canceled each other out." "Today," she warmly recalls, "we're sponsoring different churches, one of us is a liberal and the other a conservative, but we share many of the same values including the importance of our extended families, our love of the outdoors, especially sailing, our prudent use of money and self-sufficiency."

Gina was raised in Newton, Massachusetts. She was very shy in school but enjoyed being in a closely-knit extended family who introduced her to folks from around the world and stressed an attitude of acceptance of all others. Of significance, she learned to sail on the Charles River. Although during high school she had settled on becoming an architect and had early acceptance in the smallest accredited school she could find, by the spring of her senior year she changed her mind. So, at the suggestion of a friend, she applied and was accepted to UMaine, sight unseen. That summer she came to Maine for the first time, babysitting for a Newton family with 4 children on Mt Desert Island. “And so began my love of this state.”

During her first year at UMO, she took Zoology with Dr. Benjamin Speicher, chairman of Maine’s zoology department and “zoo” became her major. It was while working for an aunt, a pediatrician, that Gina witnessed how she successfully combined a medical career with being a mother. After returning to Orono and with the encouragement of Dr. Speicher, she made sure to take all the courses required for medical school, having overcome an earlier belief: “I never thought I was smart enough to go to medical school.”

When asked her choice of a favorite professor at Orono, she quickly responded “Richard Emerick and his Anthropology class.”

But it was for Dr. Speicher that she reserves the term “my influential mentor.”

“You might like to know that more than one of my UMO friends remember finding me in my room studying more than being out having fun, though I felt I was having more fun in school than ever before.”

Upon UMaine graduation, Gina enrolled at the University of Vermont Medical School, taking advantage of a special in-state tuition rate. During her third year, she had her first exposure to a very dynamic anesthesiology department. Following graduation, she took a rotating internship at St Paul Ramsey Hospital in Minnesota where she also shared her first sailboat with a nurse. The next year she started her anesthesia residency at Massachusetts General Hospital.

Today, Gina recalls her enjoyment of her practice primarily in city hospitals. “I always liked providing care and comfort during time-limited situations, working with machines, and anesthesia charts better than managing situations where my weakness in time management and writing concise records were a problem,” she

quips. When asked about the most challenging aspect of her career, she quickly comments, “keeping up with rapid changes in new developments.”

For the same reason, she decided not to return to practice after her 4-year hiatus in the 90’s and turned instead to a 25-year commitment to hospice as a volunteer in several different roles. “I’m also committed to trying to help others understand why I am so committed to a single-payer health system.”

Tom and Gina celebrated the birth of their first son Scott in 1972. Gina smiles when describing Scott’s youth and early adult years. " He has marvelous ways of solving problems that not all of his teachers appreciated then. He tried different schools, but it wasn’t until he took an Outward Bound Course (his high school graduation present) after his first college semester, that things began to change. He completed his freshman year, worked odd jobs, then became an Outward Bound instructor eventually finishing college and then medical school in 1999.” Since then, Scott has had a very successful career as a hospital-based internist, a hospitalist. Today, he heads the hospitalists unit at Berkshire Medical Center, Pittsfield, MA. He has a 21-year-old son and he and his wife Kathy feel fortunate to have a significant presence in the lives of her 5 nieces and nephews.

Born in 1974, their second son Tim’s course was more direct. During a summer job while at Rice University, his boss, a Ph.D., suggested if Tim wanted to do medical research, he should consider going to medical school. Tim did so, becoming a pediatrician. In addition to caring for patients, he oversees the business side of his group practice. He and his obstetrician wife Claudia have three daughters, two of who compete nationally in junior freestyle skiing.

Gina and Tom bought their Surry, Maine home in 1986, “fulfilling a dream I had since leaving college,” Gina says. Their spacious home overlooks Union River Bay looking easterly to Cadillac Mountain. Gina remembers, “our house was but a shell when we bought it and we were fortunate to be able to design its interior. It’s been 30 years since we moved here in 1991.”

Both Tom and Gina retired at age 50 having decided earlier they wanted to do some serious sailing.

1991 was the same year Tom and Gina purchased a 42-foot ketch. For several years, they sailed annually from Surry to the Virgin Islands taking the offshore route. " We explored islands as far south as Grenada and in 1996 sailed home visiting Puerto Rico, the Turks and Caicos, Bahamas, and up the east coast; another dream fulfilled.”

Even today, joined by their son Scott and daughter-in-law Kathy serving as captain and first mate, they're still aboard chartered yachts for annual cruises in the Caribbean. In the future, Scott and Kathy hope to join them in Surry so they can stay in the home they all love.

There's a facet to Gina's life that few of our 1963 colleagues may know, deep within her being: Alzheimer's Disease or AD. Some 10 members of her close family have been afflicted. These have included a grandmother, a great aunt, her father and his 3 siblings, a younger brother, and three cousins, all affected by AD or other dementia. ("This was," Gina relates, "a big factor in our decision to move to Maine and to sail in our 50's.")

Was her focus on AD factored in her decision to enter medicine? "No," she replies, "but it was instrumental in my becoming involved with hospice during the past 25 years." Tom and Gina joined Evensong, an acapella hospice singing group that visits individuals on request as they approach death. She says it has been an amazingly meaningful experience.

How involved is she in her observations and considerations of Alzheimer's as a part of her life?

Gina has been a participant in an exhaustive 4.5-year study, concluded in the fall of 2022, of a drug designed to reduce conditions related to AD. Once a month, every month for all those years, Gina has traveled to Boston for her drug infusion. She did not know if her IV was the study drug or a placebo. Her tests included mental function tests, physical exams, blood work, annual MRIs and PET scans, and more. "I had not been told the results of any of the testing since I began when I did learn that I have plaques and tangles in my brain usually associated with AD and that I did not meet the criteria of having an AD diagnosis." These findings were requirements for participating in the study.

The results? "I've progressed to what they call 'a mild cognitive impairment.'" "At least at my age (80)," she cautiously smirks, "I'm no longer worried about 'early onset.'"

Recently, when asked where she might live if given a choice of anywhere in the world, her response is immediate and passionate. "Right here in Maine, in Surry. I've had a wonderful and full life but the past 30 years have been the happiest."

Together, Tom and Gina continue their joyful participation in several area vocal groups and church choirs, looking forward to their annual Caribbean charter cruises, and the visits to and from the “kids and grandkids.” Her interest in hospice continues, respectful of the patients’ choices about the end of their lives. “I love interacting with them,” she offers, “providing care and comfort.”

She concluded, “I often realize I haven’t given Tom the credit he surely deserves for all of his support and for making so many of my dreams come true.” As evidence, Gina includes their last two cross-country driving trips. “The first included an 8-day celebration of our 50th wedding anniversary rafting through the Grand Canyon with family members.” “The second,” she boasts, “was our trip to my 50th state, North Dakota, as a part of heading home from the Pacific Northwest this past summer.”

Gina and Tom celebrate their connection to UMaine where they have established a scholarship for deserving young folks from Hancock County. Currently, Gina serves on the Class executive committee, giving thoughts about the Class’s 60th reunion.

She offers her version of the University’s key selling point: “It’s the authenticity of its people. It’s the feeling you can be the person you want to be, not what others expect you to be. Remember the Maine HELLO? It opened doors for me and I have no doubt about the significant role UMO played in shaping my life,” she says.