

Natasha Reatig, wise, witty, loving



March 21, 2019

Natasha Reatig, a fixture of the '80s and '90s Washington, D.C. cultural and arts scene, died in Bethany Beach Monday, March 18, 2019, after an extended battle with cancer.

For more than two decades her informal salons, held unfailingly every Wednesday night, drew scores of artists, poets, writers, actors, filmmakers, fashion designers and other creative beings to such venues as Columbia Station, Cafe Lautrec, The Biltmore Bar, Cafe Riche, Bradshaw's, and Chief Ike's Mambo Room. A patroness of the arts, minus the wealth often associated with that term, her salons set the stage for attendees to meet, socialize, share ideas, plan and collaborate. In a 1992 Washington Post interview, she related that salon members have experienced "at least seven stable marriages, love affairs come and gone, apartments and jobs found and abandoned, and a network established."

Her friend of more than 35 years, Andy Anderson, says that he met Natasha in 1983. “A classmate at Georgetown University had heard about a woman who had this cool thing in Adams Morgan every Wednesday where artists and musicians hang out. We went and it felt like home to me. She was warm, wise, witty and loving. From her I learned that it was really possible to pursue a career in the arts. I was on a path to become a lawyer, which would have been a terrible fit for me, but at her salon I met people who were actually making a living doing creative things.”

Another long-time friend, Rusty Ruble, characterized her as “a combination of Madame Sousatzka, Auntie Mame, Margaret Mead, Betty Friedan and Jane Fonda - while remaining a true original. From the walls of her home to the company that she kept, one was treated to a rich tapestry of diverse individuals and objects from near and far, uniquely dear and interesting to her.”

In the late 1970s, she embraced what she described as the “emerging new-wave/art/punk/ avant-garde scene” in downtown D.C., hosting numerous parties at late-night hangouts such as dc space, The 9:30 Club, and The Bank nightclub, in support of artists, musicians and other performers.

In 1991, she co-founded The ROSEBUD Awards, an annual tri-state film and video competition and showcase that honored innovative, unusual, experimental or deeply personal work. ROSEBUD later became part of Arlington Independent Media Inc. She served on the board of directors of the Washington Film and Video Council from 1995-2001, two of those years as president, and co-founded an annual Peer Awards competition honoring significant achievement in various aspects of filmmaking. The Peer Awards competition is now run by the Television, Internet & Video Association of D.C. Inc. (TIVA).

With her purple-tinted hair and vintage yet classy/chic attire, she did not look the part of a federal employee with a long and distinguished career. Yet for 31 years until her retirement in 1996, Ms. Reatig held positions of increasing responsibility, beginning as a research assistant at the National Institute of Mental Health, progressing to grants program officer at the Psychopharmacology Research Branch, then on to a stint with NIMH’s Homelessness and Mental Illness programs before landing her “dream job,” director of Protection and Advocacy Program for Individuals with Mental Illness at the NIMH Center for Mental Health Services in Rockville, Md. In recognition of her professional contributions she received many awards, culminating in the Secretary’s Award for Distinguished Services, presented to her in 1996 by Donna Shalala, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. Natasha Reatig, known to everyone simply as “Natasha,” was the only child of an unlikely marriage. Her father, Abraham Bihovsky, the son of Russian Jewish fur traders, was born in Mongolia and by the mid 1930s was living in Tientsin, China. Her mother, Helena Zhemchuzhny, born in St. Petersburg, Russia, was the daughter of a prominent Russian physician who, fleeing Russia, had also landed with his family in Tientsin. Shortly after their marriage in 1937, amidst the Japanese invasion of China, the young couple decided to emigrate to the United States. This proved more difficult than expected: as a previously naturalized American citizen, there was no problem for Abe, but Helena, not a U.S. citizen, was denied entry. Finally, in May of 1938 when Abe was able to secure \$2,000 to prove to the satisfaction of the United State’s government that Helena would not be a burden to American taxpayers, she was allowed to emigrate to New York City, where she and her husband took up residence.

There, on April 10, 1941, Natasha entered this world as Natalie Ann Bates (her father had by then changed his name to “Bates” from Bihovsky). In her autobiography “Crossing Borders,” Natalie’s mother described her shock at her young daughter’s extreme “willfulness” and defiance of authority. Natalie was taken for an evaluation at the Yale Child Clinic, where her mother’s fears were relieved when Natalie was pronounced “gifted” and in possession of a “dynamic personality.” For a number of

years during her childhood, Natalie attend the Cherry Lawn School in rural Darien, Conn., a progressive and innovative school where she wrote poetry, took music, dance and painting classes, and even excelled at horseback riding.

At age 9, her mother remarried and moved to Washington, providing Natalie with a stepfather (Sergius Yakobson) and a 14-year-old stepbrother. Dennis, her new sibling, described how “the “addition of a bright, engaging child” to what had previously been a cold and lonely household “saved us from what could have been a complete disaster. All were entranced by her.” After leaving Cherry Lawn, Natalie attended public schools in Washington, D.C., including Gordon Junior High School and Woodrow Wilson High School, happily participating in sock hops and cheerleading, graduating in 1958. From there it was on to Vassar College, majoring in cultural anthropology (class of 1962), later followed by a self-described “no agenda/no strings” trip to Europe. After three months of traveling, she found herself in Israel. Staying there for a year, she worked (doing interviews with Kurdistan families who had recently arrived in Israel), studied Hebrew, and lived with an Israeli sculptor.

After returning to the United States in 1965, now known as “Natasha,” she married the Israeli sculptor Matti Reatig and resumed life in the Washington area. The marriage lasted five years and the parting was amicable. As Natasha described it, “Good times and no regrets.”

During the late 1960s and ‘70s, Natasha was an outspoken supporter of the civil rights, anti-war and feminist movements. She served on the NIMH Minority Affairs Committee, and the ADAMHA (Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration) Women’s Council and was one of the organizing leaders of the Vietnam Moratorium Committee at NIH/HIMH. For 10 years she served on the board of directors for the Boston-based Public Responsibility in Medicine and Research, a nonprofit organization concerned with research-related ethical and legal issues. She was also a founding member of ARENA (Applied Research Ethics, National Association), an organization for scientists and administrators serving on institutional review boards.

A world traveler (Europe, the Middle East, Australia, Mexico, Aruba, Russia....) with friends scattered all over the globe, Natasha moved to Bethany Beach a number of years after retirement and continued her active lifestyle for the rest of her life. Continuing her tradition of weekly salons, meeting in various locations for “happy hours” each week, she also participated with the Shore Democrats and enjoyed singing with the local AARP Chorus. Her beach home often teemed with family, friends and the friends of friends.

Diagnosed with lung cancer in August 2016, Natasha continued to provide encouragement and support to her friends and loved ones throughout her battle with the disease. Far outdistancing the medical estimates of “six weeks to six months” given early in 2017, she remained upbeat and appreciative of the life that she had led. In an interview with a local news magazine in 2018, she stated “ I feel fully content, fulfilled and ready-to-go when death comes. My life choices - to stay single, to not have children - have enabled me to explore all of my interests and passions. I’ve been very lucky and I feel very grateful and very happy.”

Her half-sister Victoria Levy of Los Altos, Calif., described Natasha as “warm, generous, confident, engaging and knowledgeable on a huge variety of subjects. She was a loving aunt to her niece and nephew, easily bonding with them. An inspiring, independent woman, she made the world a better place.”

In addition to her half-sister, she is survived by another half-brother, William Bates of Mount Airy, Md.; stepbrother Dennis Yakobson of Denver, Colo.; friend and longtime companion Theodore Pawlik of Washington, D.C.; and her many devoted and cherished friends.

At Natasha's request, no formal services are planned. Donations in her honor can be made to Arlington Independent Media Inc., FBO ROSEBUD, 2701-C Wilson Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201.

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