

Resident

COMMUNITY NEWS

THE WAY WE WERE: CLARK AND ROSALEE BRYAN CONNOR WITH NATALIE BRYAN

By Julie Kerns Garmendia
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On the ninth day of every month, Clark and Rosalee Connor of Ortega hurry to be the first to wish the other a “Happy Anniversary.” The Connors will celebrate their 49th wedding anniversary on June 9, 2017, remaining very much in love since they day they met in 1963.

Described as “unfailingly loving and affectionate with each other, every day” by Rosalee’s younger sister, Natalie Bryan, who often interprets for the deaf couple, the Connors together enjoy watching daily sunrises over the St. Johns River and sunsets over the Ortega River.

In the mornings, Clark, 73, makes sure Rosalee, 70, eats her fruit by cutting it up for her to share with him at breakfast. “I’m too lazy to cut up fruit and I will only eat it if it tastes good,” said Rosalee. “Almost every morning we have fruit and, if it tastes good, Clark will give me some.”

Rosalee also said they have cut each other’s hair for more than 40 of the 54 years they have known each other.



Rosalee Connor hugs sister Natalie Bryan in an airport, 2000

The Bryan backstory

Rosalee and Natalie’s family has lived in Jacksonville since 1938.

Their grandfather, Sylvester G. Chumley Sr. owned the Chumley-Drury Company Lumber & Building Supplies, located on River Oaks Road in San Marco near the Florida East Coast Railyard.

Their mother, Phyllis Arlene Chumley, was the only deaf member of her family. She attended school at the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind (FSDB) in St. Augustine, where she eventually met her husband, Delmar Thomas Bryan, who she married in 1943 at Southside Baptist Church.

When Phyllis was growing up, her family rented a home briefly on Talbot Avenue, then at 1520 River Oaks Road in San Marco, before settling in Avondale. In 1942, they bought a home at 3865 Eloise Street.

Phyllis’ father built a collapsible 8-by-10-foot playhouse for her brother Syl to play in and store his toys when they lived on River Oaks Road, according to a memoir written by Phyllis. The playhouse moved with the family from River Oaks Road to the Eloise Street house and was always renovated to match their home’s exterior. The playhouse moved for the final time to the backyard of 1641 Pine Grove Avenue, when Phyllis and her husband bought that house for \$4,000 in 1945. Still owned by the family, Rosalee and Natalie recall how happy their mother was to make her last mortgage payment of \$25 on the house.

Located between Boone and Fishweir Parks, the house was near a bus stop, handy



The Bryan Family in 1959: Pamela, Rosalee, Phyllis with Natalie, Delmar with Tommy, Camelle

for Phyllis, who did not learn to drive or obtain her driver’s license until she was 57 years old. The Bryans were members of Murray Hill Baptist Church and of the River City Association of the Deaf.

Phyllis and Delmar had five children – a son, Delmar Thomas “Tommy” Bryan, Jr., and four daughters, two of which were born deaf: Rosalee (deaf); identical twin girls Pamela (hearing) and Camelle (deaf); and Natalie (hearing).

Rosalee and Natalie share many fond memories of their childhood in Avondale. They always shopped at the Pine Grove Deli for meat and penny candy, and at the 5 & 10 Cent Store located on St. Johns Avenue where Casablanca is now located.

Their family bought its groceries at the A & P Grocery where Ray’s Hardware now stands and loved going to the Penny Burger Drive-in, where St. Johns Village is located.

The family’s milk was always purchased from the Skinner’s Dairy Drive-Thru at the apex of Herschel and St. John’s Avenue and the glass bottles were returned for a refill.

Rosalee remembers home delivery of milk, eggs, and dry ice for the ice box. She also recalls the hard work of hand-cranking an old clothes machine to wash clothing.

When the Bryan children received vaccines at their pediatric appointments, their grandmother, Annie Lee Chumley, always took them to Dreamette for ice cream afterwards, which ensured a speedy recovery.

Annie Lee named all her grandchildren. In 1963, Phyllis and Delmar demolished their Pine Grove Avenue garage and built an 800-square-foot house on their property for her to live in, on a double lot she helped them purchase. The small house has its own address on Valencia Road.

Continued on page 2

Annie Lee, influenced by years of living in New Mexico, would order a huge load of dirt, bags and candles each December to light luminarias, a Southwest holiday tradition. The family believes she introduced the idea of luminarias to the neighborhood.

Beginning of a love story

Meanwhile, Clark Connor, who was born deaf just like his wife, spent his early years in Williston, North Dakota. Delivered by the same rural doctor who had attended his mother's birth, he grew up in a log cabin, which was later preserved and made into a museum and relocated to a historic park.

Clark's mother was a teacher who wore a hearing aid later in life and lived to age 100. In contrast, his father, Adrian Michael Connor was hearing, and died at age 60. When Clark was one, the family moved from North Dakota to Spokane, Washington.

Rosalee met Clark at Gallaudet College (now University) on her first day of summer school in 1963. They credit FSDB and Gallaudet University (which requires one full year of on-campus, pre-college education prior to the traditional four-year degree programs) for helping them to enjoy successful careers and fulfilling lives.

After college graduation, the Connors had jobs waiting for them in Washington, D.C. With a math degree, Clark began work for the U.S. Department of Defense Army Mapping Agency as a cartographer, mathematician and later a computer specialist.



Rosalee Bryan and Clark Connor at Gallaudet College, 1965

Rosalee completed her Bachelor's in library science and began work for the U.S. Library of Congress. She also completed her Master's in library science at the University of Maryland. They married in 1968 at Trinity Baptist Church when it was located on McDuff Avenue. The couple lived in Maryland and enjoyed sailing on their 34-foot Pacific Seacraft sailboat, Sea Gull, during their working life.

Clark retired in 1991, and Rosalee retired in 2002 after her father died. For the next several years, the Connors often traveled to Jacksonville to help Natalie with their mother's care, which was complicated by the onset of dementia.

In 2004, the Connors sailed Sea Gull to Jacksonville and docked it at Graham's Boatyard, now the Marina at Ortega Landing.

During the trip from Maryland down the Intracoastal Waterway, Natalie followed the Sea Gull's journey by land. She often met the Connors at many ports along their route and waved at her sister and brother-in-law at every opportunity. Recalling the trip, the Connors shook their heads and Natalie laughed while remembering some of her more spectacular viewpoints, including a wave from atop the Dames Point Bridge.

The Connors found their Ortega home while training with Natalie and brother Tommy Bryan to run a marathon in 2006. The Connors spotted a "for sale" sign along their favorite Avondale/Ortega route, which extended from the family home on Pine Grove to McGirts Boulevard, about five miles roundtrip. Tommy, a realtor at the

time, negotiated the Connors' purchase of their one-story ranch-style home on McGirts. The couple currently enjoys walking, often following a three-mile loop from their home across both the Roosevelt and Ortega River bridges, or roundtrip to the Pine Grove house and back, or just through their neighborhood.

Throughout their lives, the Connors' have had many adventures while traveling across the United States and abroad. With Natalie interpreting, they signed saying they have never felt restricted by deafness and are staunch advocates of education for the deaf.

Photography has been a favorite hobby for the Connors, whose massive collection documents 20 years of sailing, sporting events, family and friends. In their immaculate Ortega home, interesting photos are positioned on tables and hang on every wall.

The only homebody in the Connor family is their rescue cat, Tappy, who adopted them in 2008, and was so named because when Clark taps on something, the cat comes running, no spoken words needed.

Two's company, three's a family

Born nearly 12 years after Rosalee, Natalie, 59, said she has always felt more like the Connors' child than a sister. Athletic and active in outdoor sports of all kinds, the Connors attended all of her sporting events, and were an important part of her life growing up, encouraging her to pursue her goals and dreams, she said.

The trio have had many adventures together, including a 1969 cross-country road trip in Clark's 1966 Buick Special. The most memorable journey occurred when Natalie was 12. "They decided to take me with them on vacation. But this was an unusual vacation! We traveled through 23 states, saw Canada and Mexico, all in three weeks by car. We drove 9,500 miles and we only spent \$650," Natalie said.

Like the other hearing Bryan children, Natalie attended Fishweir Elementary and Lakeshore Junior High. At Fishweir, local park director Beverly Turner taught students how to play organized sports. Turner inspired and encouraged Natalie to pursue her athletic talents and became her mentor.

While at Robert E. Lee High School, Natalie was named to the high school's All-American Volleyball Team for the 1973 Nationals. She earned a volleyball

scholarship to Miami-Dade Community College, despite her 5-foot 4-inch height.

She was a member of the Jacksonville Women's Volleyball Club that went to the U.S. Volleyball Association's Women's National Championship games in 1974. In 1975 she played for Jacksonville Volleyball Club, which went on to qualify for the U.S. Junior Olympics. She received a sports scholarship and graduated from Jacksonville University.

After graduation Natalie taught physical education at Morning Star School in Arlington. In 2015 she earned her Master's degree in counseling and recently celebrated her 30th anniversary of teaching. Her only break from teaching was when she served in the U.S. Navy as an electronics technician from 1984-1990.

The Connors, with Natalie and other Bryan family members, have run many charity marathons in Maryland and in Florida. They began to run in support of leukemia research in memory of their brother Tommy's first wife, Jennifer Pye Bryan, who died at age 29 from acute leukemia.

Longtime volunteers at the FSDB Alumni Museum in St. Augustine, the Connors still meet monthly for lunch with other local deaf alumni from the school and enjoy kayaking near Amelia Island. They remain active with the FSDB and Gallaudet alumni groups, especially the classes that graduated in the early 1960s, and enjoy attending their class Christmas reunion, held since 1972, and the Biannual National Deaf Seniors of America Convention. They maintain close ties with friends met during their 38 years in Maryland. Once they make friends, the Connors stay in touch with them forever, Natalie said.



Cynthia Miller holding Jimmy, Delmar Bryan, Phyllis Bryan holding Rosalee, 1946



Rosalee and Clark Connor on their 34-foot sailboat, Sea Gull, near Annapolis, Maryland, 1993