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The Scene, D3

RELATIONSHIPS

Finding love again in your 90s

For Howard and Eleanor, it’s about caring, sharing and maybe letting him win at pingpong.



Emily J. Minor

They met on one of those retirement-home buses, the kind that stop at the movie house and the museum and the drugstore, the bus driver drumming the steering wheel while everyone gets situated.

“We started talking,” says Howard Woocher, 96. “And we discovered we had some things in common.”

These days, that’s more true than ever.

Howard Woocher is in love. Big time. It’s the kind of second-time-around thing he never would have predicted. Before this, Woocher, 96, had loved only one woman in his life: Ruth, his wife of 67 years. But after she died, after he’d taken a few months to regroup, after he forced himself to climb aboard the activities bus that one afternoon and go on a field trip to the Morikami Museum & Japanese Gardens in Delray Beach, after all that, he found Eleanor Skolnick, 90, who also had lost her spouse after a lifetime together.



Eleanor Skolnick, 90, and Dr. Howard Woocher, 96, found love again after first marriages that each lasted more than 50 years. They live at The Tradition of the Palm Beaches residences at MorseLife in West Palm Beach. GARY CORONADO / THE PALM BEACH POST

“I think true love can come more than just once,” Woocher says, simply. “I said to myself a few times: It is possible to fall in love with two women, like I’m doing now.”

The waning years of life can be scary and lonely. At least, that’s what most of us believe. One of us will die first – right? – leaving behind heartache, money problems and an empty side of the bed. According

to the U.S. Census, about 1.2 million Americans are widowed each year, and most of them are in their 50s when it happens.

If that seems young, it’s because it is.

And while many won’t remarry – especially those more advanced in years – the story of Howard Woocher and Eleanor Skolnick is full of hope, happiness and realism.

At their age, you have to be real.

“When you’re this age, (you want) someone who pays attention and is caring,” says Skolnick, clearly the more pragmatic of the two. “Howard is a wonderful companion. I am very fortunate.”

So sometimes she lets him win at pingpong. Sometimes.

Relationships continued on **D4**

‘I think true love can come more than just once.’

Dr. Howard Woocher

IN CONCERT

McDonald discusses music, acting, motherhood

This fall, she will shoot a pilot for ‘Ordained,’ a suspense, legal drama.

By Leslie Gray Streeter
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Recently, Audra McDonald got an opportunity most of us would kill for – to hear just what her colleagues think of her while she’s still on the job.

“It was overwhelming. I really don’t have any other word for it,” the five-time Tony winner said of last month’s bash by the Drama League Musical Celebration of Broadway, featuring luminaries such as Taye Diggs and Phylicia Rashad celebrating her career in Manhattan.

IF YOU GO

Audra McDonald, 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Festival of the Arts Boca, Mizner Park Amphitheater, Boca Raton. **Information:** 561-368-8445

“At the end of the night, I said, ‘I hope this doesn’t mean I’m gonna get hit by a bus when I walk out of here,’” she said.

It’s true most lifetime achievement awards and career retrospectives happen at the end of one’s career. However, at 42, presuming there are no out-of-control buses

headed her way, McDonald’s somewhere in the middle of hers, or even in the first third, assuming Angela Lansbury-like longevity.

And McDonald is nowhere near slowing down. Along with an upcoming pilot for CBS and live appearances, the soprano is appearing Saturday at the Festival of the Arts Boca.

“Usually I’m going, going, going. I don’t get a chance to stop and turn around and say, ‘Wow, look how far I’ve come.’ Being some hyperactive little girl in California, who got to do what I love and paid to do so, it’s one of those moments. ... I don’t normally stop and look back, unless I’m forced to stop,” she says.

McDonald continued on **D4**



Audra McDonald, five-time Tony Award winner, will perform Saturday at the Festival of the Arts Boca at the Mizner Park Amphitheater in Boca Raton. CONTRIBUTED BY MICHAEL WILSON



Want happy campers?

Come check out our event at CityPlace!

Attention Parents! It’s time for Camp-A-Palooza, a free event from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. April 6 at CityPlace. Shop for the perfect summer-camp programs and birthday-party services. Kids will enjoy fun, free activities, including a bounce house. Parents can

talk to program directors from more than 20 area summer camps. Plus, parents can pick up an early copy of The Post’s 2013 Summer Camp and Birthday Party Planning Guide at the event or look for it inside The Post on April 7. Stop by The Post’s booth at Camp-A-Palooza for a chance to win two free tickets to LEGOLAND Florida.

BOOKS

Meet Susan, get her memoir

By Jan Tuckwood
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

Susan Spencer-Wendel’s life story has already touched a worldwide audience: The “Today” show’s Natalie Morales shared her interview with Susan on Wednesday, and NPR, the BBC, USA Today and People are telling it, too.

But no one tells the amazing story of her “year of living with joy” quite like Spencer-Wendel, a former Palm Beach Post reporter who was diagnosed in June 2011 with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig’s disease.

She decided to live life to the fullest – taking trips with her loved ones and writing her



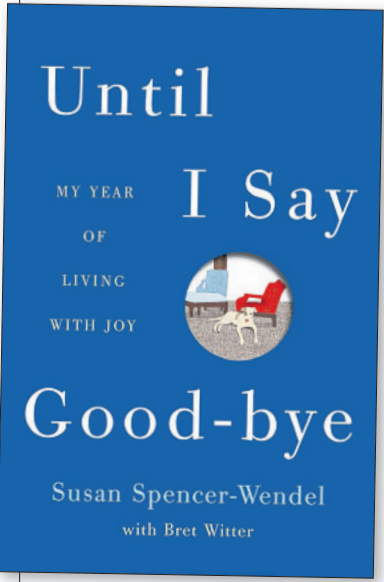
Susan Spencer-Wendel

memoir in less than four months.

Her book, “Until I Say Good-bye,” was released Tuesday. As her publisher, Harper Collins, says: The book is “funny, joyful and wise.”

Meet Susan, her husband John and collaborator Bret Witter: On Saturday, at 3 p.m., at the Barnes & Noble at CityPlace in West Palm Beach.

Hear John read excerpts from the book and read more stories about and by Susan at palmbeachpost.com/susan.



MOVIES

River Phoenix’s final film

Shelved for 20 years after the actor’s death, ‘Dark Blood’ makes U.S. debut in Miami.

By Kelli Kennedy
Associated Press

MIAMI — When actor Jonathan Pryce first received a copy of River Phoenix’s last film “Dark Blood,” it sat unwatched on his desk for months. He worried about how he would feel reliving Phoenix’s death, growing nostalgic about memorable dinners the two shared after long days of filming in Utah and recalling the shocking 5 a.m. phone call telling him the young actor had died.

“It’s very hard to comprehend for a while. It was a terribly sad time,” said Pryce, who starred in the film alongside Phoenix and Judy Davis.

Now, 20 years later, “Dark Blood” made its U.S. premiere at the Miami International Film Festival last week, a testament to the endurance of 80-year-old director George Sluizer, who almost died before the film was completed, and a tribute to Phoenix’s timeless charisma.

It’s uncertain whether the film will ever go to a general release. Sluizer said negotiations are ongoing with the company that owns the movie.

In the film, Pryce and Davis play a jet-set Hollywood couple who travel through the desert desperately trying to save their marriage on a second honeymoon. They seek shelter in Phoenix’s shack after their car breaks down, unaware that he intends to keep them as prisoners. Phoenix played Boy, whose wife died of leukemia from nuclear testing, leaving him alone and isolated in the desert.

But the journey to complete the film is every bit as dramatic as the story itself. Phoenix, a rising star from “Stand by Me” and “My Own Private Idaho,” was 23 when he died in 1993 outside The Viper Room in Los Angeles. The



Actor River Phoenix is shown while filming the movie “Dark Blood.” After his death, there was talk of finding another actor to replace Phoenix or using special effects to finish the film, but director George Sluizer ultimately passed on those options and the film footage sat untouched in a vault for years. CONTRIBUTED BY MIAMI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

cause was heart failure after overdosing on heroin and cocaine.

After his death, there was talk of finding another actor to replace Phoenix or using special effects to finish “Dark Blood.” The film was about 80 percent complete and most of the missing scenes were between Davis and Phoenix. But Sluizer ultimately passed on those options and the film footage sat untouched in a vault for years. In 1999, the Dutch director learned the footage was going to be burned to make space for new material, so he quickly transported it to The Netherlands, where it sat for another decade.

Sluizer was diagnosed with a heart arrhythmia in 2007 and “the doctors basically condemned me.” But the director recovered and felt compelled to finish “Dark Blood” before it was too late. He sorted through the material, uncovering missing and damaged reels and narrated the voiceovers himself to fill in missing pieces of the plot. He doesn’t think it is now dated, calling it a story with themes that transcend time.

When Sluizer first met



Actor Jonathan Pryce co-starred in the film “Dark Blood.”

Phoenix at a San Francisco hotel to discuss the film, he worried about how a hot-shot heart-throb would handle working with an older director.

But Phoenix was respectful and compassionate, abruptly running off to get an ailing Sluizer some headache medicine during their first meeting, and accompanying Sluizer on long hikes in Utah.

Sluizer said he knew of Phoenix’ history with substance abuse and checked in with the actor’s mother to make sure he was OK before filming began.

“River was a gentle, respectful person. I must say that I was very fond of him,” Sluizer said.

“Dark Blood” was not an easy production. The material was heavy, they filmed in desolate locations and Davis was difficult to work with and was often hard on Phoenix. He also had dyslexia and struggled to remember long segments of dialogue, which he occasionally asked Sluizer to shorten.

But Sluizer marveled at Phoenix’s ability to embody a character with such depth.

“It’s what comes out of him and the charisma he has, plus the fact that he knows how to express a character when he has got hold of it,” Sluizer said.

Pryce, who said he was a fan of Phoenix’s work in “Stand By Me,” often met the young actor and his friends for dinner, finding camaraderie in the isolated Utah desert.

“You do become incredibly close when you work together in a film ... I felt enormous empathy with him. I liked him very much,” Pryce said.

The two insist Phoenix was not using drugs while filming in Utah. But something was noticeably wrong with Phoenix when the crew returned for a shoot in Los Angeles. His eyes floated, he walked differently and sat listlessly for long periods of time.

“He had been taking something. That was quite visible,” Sluizer said.

The next morning the cast and crew received

the news.

“It was a complete shock and to be woken at 5 o’clock in the morning and the first thing that somebody says to you is, ‘River’s dead,’” Pryce said.

“It left us totally sad and after River’s death. I nearly said I don’t want to make movies anymore,” Sluizer lamented.

He dismisses any notion that the film is exploiting River’s death.

Sluizer said he spoke with Phoenix’s mother, Arlynn “Heart” Phoenix, and invited her and other family members to attend the Berlin premiere last month, where the film received a standing ovation.

“She said, ‘Well, good luck with the movie but we are not participating’,” saying the family felt the movie was finished, Sluizer said.

R.E.M. frontman Michael Stipe, who stayed with Phoenix for a few days while he was filming in Utah, also attended the Berlin premiere.

“It’s a piece of work that belongs not just to River, but all of us in the film and it was right that (Sluizer) completed it in the way that he did,” Pryce said.

FILM

Cher to pick TCM films

Singer to accompany Robert Osborne in new theme series.

By Melissa Ruggieri
Atlanta Journal-Constitution

We might need to wait longer than expected for the next Cher album — she announced recently that the planned spring release will now likely be fall — but Cher-ophiles will get a dose of the icon next month on Turner Classic Movies.

Cher will join veteran host Robert Osborne for the first edition of “Friday Night Spotlight,” a new series she will help launch April 5. The multi-hyphenate entertainment queen has handpicked 17 films to fit the theme: “A Woman’s World: The Defining Era of Women in Film.”

Cher’s chosen films illustrate the evolving roles of women from the late 1930s to the early 1950s, starting at 8 p.m. April 5 with 1945’s Joan Crawford-starring “Mildred Pierce.” The following Fridays will feature films centered on war and the homefront (“So Proudly We Hail,” “The White Cliffs of Dover” among them on April 13); working women (“His Girl Friday,” “The Devil and Miss Jones” are some offerings April 19); and women taking charge (“The Great Lie,” “Kitty Foyle,” “The Palm Beach Story” and “The Women” on April 26).

“Working with Robert isn’t like working at all! We can’t stop talking about the classics and obscure golden oldies. I can’t stop when it comes to the subject of old films, and then I get Robert going, and then the crew and director finally say, ‘Ahh, Cher? We have a show to do.’ Robert and I laugh and become gowns-ups again,” Cher said in a statement.

Couple find love in their 90s

Relationships

continued from D1

This number is hard to believe but, between the two of them, Howard and Eleanor spent 131 years with their respective spouses. Skolnick was married to her husband, Dr. Charles Skolnick, an ophthalmologist, for 64 years when he died five years ago. He was the only man she’d ever dated. Woocher, a retired dentist, was with Ruth for 67.

“Charlie was the love of my life, and Ruth was the love of Howard’s life,” Skolnick says.

After his wife died in

2009, Woocher went through the motions of life, or at least he tried to. And when Skolnick sat with him that one day on the bus — she’d been to the movies; he’d been to the museum — they realized both of them had very fond memories of the Berkshires. “I used to spend summers there with my wife, and she was brought up there, so I told her we had something in common,” he remembers.

A few months later, around Memorial Day, Skolnick — who still gets around like a champ, despite “a little arthritis” — saw Woocher at a party and asked if he wanted to dance. He told her he was still too sad, that it still felt too soon. “Ask me on the Fourth of July,” he said. She did.

That was almost four years ago, and they’ve



Eleanor Skolnick, 90, and Dr. Howard Woocher, 96, of West Palm Beach, have been together for almost four years. GARY CORONADO / THE PALM BEACH POST

been together since. He keeps his own place at Tradition of the Palm Beaches, the West Palm

Beach retirement home where they live. She keeps her place. There will be no marriage. “We

talked about that and decided no,” she says. But her kids love him and his kids love her. The

grandchildren also are gaga over grandma and grandpa.

And Eleanor Skolnick and Howard Woocher? They’re simply happy to have been smart enough to open up their hearts — again.

“The more I went with him, the more I found out what a very kind, considerate gentleman he is,” she says. “I enjoy his company, and he enjoys mine. We make ourselves very happy.”

They go to shows, attend lectures and take classes at Florida Atlantic University. They practice on the putting green, play Rummikub and keep the pingpong room alive with laughter.

“Our goal is to stay healthy,” she says.

“I’ll tell ya,” says Woocher, a man in love. “I feel a lot younger than my age.”

Soprano keeping very busy

McDonald

continued from D1

There’s a lot to look back on. McDonald is tied with Julie Harris and Lansbury for the most Tony wins, for “Carousel,” “Master Class,” “Ragtime,” “A Raisin In The Sun” and, most recently, “Porgy And Bess.”

Earlier this year, she did the last episode of ABC’s “Private Practice,”

a hit series she’d left because it was taped in Los Angeles, while her family was in New York.

“It was such a reunion. I felt like I’d never left. We all adored each other, and still have those relationships, even though the show’s over,” she says. “I loved doing ‘Private Practice’ but I needed to be at home with my family.”

As mothers with or without Tonys can tell you, being at home with one’s family means braving the risks of being close, like germs, even when you really, really need to stay away from them.

On the day of this interview, “everybody around me was getting sick,” she

said. “With what I do for a living, traveling, I’ve been on a lot of airplanes for the last six days.

Aside from eating really well, taking a lot of vitamins and putting Neosporin ointment on my nose when I fly, there’s only so much I can do. I can’t not be with my kid. I can’t not live my life. Sometimes you do end up getting sick. There’s no avoiding it. But I try fortifying my body so I get by it quickly. I don’t have a choice, unless there are times when your body says, ‘Nope! Not gonna do that!’”

McDonald recently took a break from her already busy schedule to do a master class at

St. Mary’s College in Indiana. She says the students weren’t the only ones getting a lesson.

“You learn so much about yourself as a teacher. It forces you to take a look at your own work,” she says. “(They asked questions) like, ‘Where do you start? I wanna be on Broadway! What do I do first? Where should I go to school? Should I study or go straight to New York? Should I do parts that are written just for African-Americans, if I’m African-American, or just ones written for Caucasians, if I’m Caucasian?’”

The fact that an African-American actress and singer such as Mc-

Donald finds so much work is a sign things have changed some in the business and in society, “but there is always work that needs to be done.”

“Unfortunately, we’re not in a post-racial society yet. It would be nice to say we are, because we’ve got an African-American president, but the Voting Rights Act is under fire right now! So there’s so much to be done,” she said. “I have seen it get somewhat better, but I kind of thought we’d be further along.”

This fall, McDonald is part of a pilot shot in New York called “Ordained,” which she describes as “a suspense, legal drama

about a Kennedy-esque family, with a father who used to be governor, a sister who was mayor, and the main character, who was a priest and left to become a lawyer,” she says. “I play his mentor and boss.”

While nothing in life, including TV pilots, are guaranteed to last forever, McDonald says she’s excited about what she’s doing.

What’s more, she wouldn’t have changed anything about the journey that’s brought her here.

“Every single moment of my life,” she says, “has led me to where I am.”