

Joan Almon—Recollection of Her Life and Legacy

Clopper Almon, Cynthia Hindes, Susan Howard



Joan Almon—Waldorf early childhood pioneer in North America, champion of children, visionary, protector of humanity, and much more—passed the threshold of death into the spiritual world on July 14, 2019. Her biography, her initiative in so many domains, and the legacy she leaves stand as encouragement and inspiration for all. In this spirit, it is a privilege for Gateways to honor her dauntless energy and dedication to the welfare of children in the following remembrances.

Joan Evelyn Wolfsheimer Almon was born August 6, 1944 in Wilmington, Delaware to Jewish immigrants Karl and Frances Hirsch Wolfsheimer. Her parents had already obtained their exit visas from Nazi Germany when Karl, a merchant, was arrested on the morning after Kristallnacht and sent to Dachau in 1938. By a stroke of destiny, the Nazi employee they were required to hire directed Frances exactly where to go and with whom to speak to get Karl released so they could leave Europe. After settling in Wilmington, Joan and her older brother, Philip, were born. In time, German reparations enabled them to open a clothing shop. Unfortunately, the BRCA gene, that would later plague Joan, ran through Karl's family. He died of a brain tumor when Joan was 12. Her mother continued the business.

Joan attended public schools including Pierre Dupont High School, class of '62, where she edited the yearbook and was voted 'most intellectual'. After graduating from the University of Michigan with a bachelor's in sociology, she worked in the non-profit sector for an anti-poverty organization and for two years as a secretary for the civil rights activist, Bayard Rustin, where she took calls from such people as Martin Luther King.

Wanting to be even closer to life in the sixties, she took a job in San Francisco, intrigued by the hippie scene. Recounts of her escapades shocked adult relatives to silence at a Passover seder.

She returned to the East Coast and worked for the City of Baltimore. She joined the Savitria communal living center where, at twenty-seven, she picked up the threads of her life calling. She co-founded the New Morning School, with an eclectic approach to early childhood education, in 1971. Her school co-founder attended a lecture by Werner Glas, who connected them with the Washington Waldorf School,

where Clopper Almon and his wife, Shirley, were founders. As greeter for a lecture by Alan Howard, Clopper was approached by a bespectacled young woman -- namely Joan -- with a large tape recorder. When told that no recording was allowed, she protested. But, as Clopper says, she obeyed him for the first and last time.

A dinner invitation led to friendship with Clopper and Shirley. Sadly, Shirley died of cancer in the fall of 1975. Meanwhile Joan took education courses in Maryland and at the Waldorf Institute in Detroit. She further studied Anthroposophy at the Rudolf Steiner summer institute.

Recognizing a mutual connection after Shirley's death, Joan and Clopper were married October 10, 1976.

In 1978, Joan and her husband went to Austria for a year in connection with his work. Joan apprenticed herself to one of the great Waldorf early childhood teachers in Vienna and visited the kindergartens of others in Germany and Switzerland. What we think of as standard Waldorf early childhood practices – painting, stories, songs, play stands, puppetry – derive from inspirations Joan brought back from Europe.

When she returned to the US the next year, she taught kindergarten for the next ten years at Acorn Hill in Silver Spring, Maryland. In 1983 Joan founded the Waldorf Kindergarten Association (today known as WECAN--the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America) in order to provide resources and support to the growing number of Waldorf early childhood educators in North America. She launched the *Gateways* newsletter, edited a number of publications, and organized the first North American Waldorf early childhood conferences. Joan also travelled internationally as a lecturer and advisor to countless kindergartens on several continents. Though soft-spoken, she had a gift for speaking in a way that held everyone's attention. She could explain anthroposophical ideas and ideals clearly and objectively in ordinary, understandable language. She was also active in the International Waldorf Kindergarten Association (IASWECE). She became so much in demand that she gave up her teaching position in 1989. Added to all of this, she was for a time also general co-secretary of the Anthroposophical Society in America.

But her interests and influence were not limited to Waldorf circles. In 1999 she co-founded the Alliance for Childhood. This organization works as a collaboration of professionals in education, health, business, child welfare and other areas to identify and advocate for the most important issues in the lives of children. Joan worked tirelessly to restore play and play-based learning for children and youth. She was the author of *Fool's Gold - A Critical Look at Computers in Childhood*, and co-author of *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*

Joan was a big-picture person, a visionary. But her vision did not remain just ideas. She was, in terms familiar to Waldorf educators, the quintessential choleric. Her motto was 'will act'.

Her love of puppetry resulted in an ambitious production of Goethe's fairytale, "The Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily", which played in nine cities, including New York. (Video recording of this marionette play can be viewed online at Vimeo 134996053.) She expanded the repertory of Waldorf kindergarten stories to include world folk and wisdom tales so that North Americans could be a part of the global community.

Joan was first and foremost a teacher. She loved to share and enable others in developing their own resources. She was compassionate and kind. She could see the best in others. Someone said they had never heard her say anything negative about another person. And Joan was a supportive friend, direct, objective, unsentimental. And humorous – if you were looking for her at a big gathering, you could find her in the middle of the group that was laughing.

In 2002, at age 58, she began a battle with breast cancer in advancing forms that would last seventeen years. She held them all at bay. All the while, few people knew, because she kept working continually. During the predawn hours she passed away peacefully in her sleep on Sunday, July 14.

Joan was in the process of writing a book with the working title, "Learning with Children." Although unfinished, this volume will be published. In this way, her work, the effects of her lifework, and her tremendous legacy will shine into the future.

Joan was a warrior with an enormous heart, tremendous will forces, and a deep understanding of the needs of the young child. Our hearts are heavy, but we are inspired by her initiative and tireless good will on behalf of children everywhere.

This tribute to Joan ends with the verse from Rudolf Steiner's *Calendar of the Soul* for the week Joan died, number 15 (14-20 July). Interestingly, this was the only verse Joan had reworked for herself from the German.

I feel the Spirit's weaving
As if enchanted by the world's phenomena;
And my true self has now been wrapped
In the dimness of the senses,
Giving to me at last the strength
Which I myself, confined and bound,
Lack the power to achieve alone!

Joan was honored as a "Waldorf pioneer" in *Gateways, Issue 69, Fall 2015*. This can be accessed online by going to www.waldorflibrary.org. Click on "journals," click on "Gateways" and scroll down to the Fall 2015 issue. The contents of this article came directly out of a three-hour interview with Joan. In many ways, readers can hear Joan's personal voice, humor, power, and 'will act' determination as she describes the journey to her destiny path of work with and for young children.