

Woman hoped for one letter; she got 50

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She laughed when I told her people would write.

I sat in her studio apartment in Stanton, where she has lived since ovarian cancer took her ability to go up and down the stairs of the Seal Beach house where she lived for 40 years. Barbara Parks, 71, is giving away most of her possessions. I had the idea that her Adler typewriter could go to the person who wrote her the best letter.

“Do you think I'll get any letters?”

I assured her people would write.

“What am I going to do with the Adler if nobody writes?” she asked as I was leaving.

I assured her people would write.

If I have learned anything in the year since I started Project 88, it is this: People love to connect.

Barbara moved me when I heard her emotional story. She is giving away some jewelry, records, a framed Bible page and other belongings after a doctor told her there was nothing more that could be done about her cancer.

I visited with her for about an hour, and I left thinking that was a lot for her to endure. She looked so frail. I've talked to her on the phone a few times since, and each time I think I've taken too much of what precious time she has left.

She worked almost four decades as a writer and editor at Cal State Long Beach. The old Adler typewriter sat in her den for most of those years, waiting for her to bring home extra work.

“I wanted the Adler to go where the most people would use it and benefit from it,” Barbara said.

When she opened her mail last week, she counted up more than 50 letters. She was so weak on some days she didn't have the strength to open and read them all.

“I was overwhelmed,” she said. “I was shocked. I thought I would be lucky to get one letter.”

Barbara got a letter from a woman who teaches blind students. She said typewriters are good for blind people because of the feel and the sound.

She got a letter from a very bright 12-year-old girl who has six typewriters at home. She uses one typewriter to write letters, another to write poetry.

She got a letter from a homeless woman living in her car. She got a letter from the Orange County Jail from a man who didn't want the typewriter; he just wanted someone to talk to.

An old boyfriend she hadn't seen in 30 years showed up at her apartment for a visit. She got a letter from San Francisco. She got letters from people who told her their life stories.

“Too bad I can't clone my Adler,” Barbara said. “I was amazed so many people wanted to use a typewriter.”

In the end, Barbara selected the Museum of Teaching and Learning in Fullerton as the destination for her Adler.

In the winning letter, Greta Nagel, the founding director, explained that she lost her husband, Glenn, to cancer in 2003. Barbara had known Glenn Nagel from his years as the dean of the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics at Cal State Long Beach.

Greta wrote: “We do large-scale exhibits in other people's galleries and museums, but we have a growing collection of vintage learning tools in our ‘minimuseum.’ Your typewriter would be a perfect addition, for we love having donors' stories to go along with the various items and we encourage visitors to touch those artifacts (with care).”

Greta also has a lot of poetry planned for Barbara's Adler.

“It would also make us happy to use your typewriter as a tool for writing poems on demand,” Greta wrote. “After reading about a talented woman who travels to public venues and writes poems on her typewriter for others upon request, I know we have a circle of supporters who could do that same thing on certain days right in our little office/minimuseum.”

Barbara's typewriter is destined for display at the holiday open house on Dec. 13, where people will be encouraged to type on it.

“I'm so excited,” Greta said. “What a nice gesture she's made.”