

***LOVING AND REMEMBERING  
NORMA***



*My best friend for more than 60 years*

*Mike Briggs  
June 5, 2015*

## ***HER FAMILY***

Norma Lynne Briggs was born on June 5, 1935, in Romford, England, just east of London. Her parents were Florence Evelyn Lucas and William Albert Jones. Her father was of Welsh descent. Her grandfather Lascelles Lucas was descended from a family with Yorkshire roots that had been settled in London for three generations, developing row housing in the rapidly expanding suburbs. The story is that Lascelles, a man of means, wooed and won Norma's Scottish grandmother Jeanette Ferguson when she was a captain in the newly-founded Salvation Army, working as a slum missionary in London. The couple had ten children before Lascelles left Jeanette. Norma had 39 first cousins scattered around the globe, and stayed in touch with them.

## ***WORLD WAR II***

Norma's parents divorced when she was two. During World War II, Norma and her mother were evacuated to an aunt's home in North Wales, and then to Wolverhampton, but returned to the Romford area in time to experience the enemy rocket attacks of the last days of the war. Her mother was remarried to Charles Brown. Her half-brothers Michael and Derek were born in 1946 and 1948. They preceded her in death. Her name was changed to Brown by court order.

## ***SCHOOLDAYS***

When she was 11, Norma was enrolled at Lillesden, a boarding school for girls in Kent, England, with help from Arthur Lucas, her oldest uncle. She excelled academically, played tennis and lacrosse, and was a member of a modern dance group. It was there that she met her lifelong friends Gill (Hinge) Manning and Margaret (Draper) Muraszko. She telephoned and emailed them often. They survive her.

## ***COLLEGE AND MARRIAGE***

In 1954, Norma met her future husband Michael (Mike) Briggs at the University of Exeter in Devonshire, England. Norma was elected vice-president of the student union. They said that their relationship strengthened because Mike, as social secretary of the union, coordinated the Saturday night hops, in which he played piano in an intermission jazz band and for which he had free tickets. Norma and Mike were married after their junior year on June 30, 1956, in a civil ceremony in Romford, and went back to Exeter to summer jobs as bus conductors.

During the next academic year Norma and Mike lived in Exeter. After Mike graduated in 1957, they again worked the summer on the buses. They moved to London the next fall. Norma completed her B.A.

there, graduating with high honors. She majored in English. Meanwhile, Mike earned a master's in teaching.

### *THE NEW LAND; CHILDREN ARRIVE*

In September, 1958, after touring Belgium and Holland with Norma's mother and brother Derek, Norma and Mike sailed from Rotterdam on a freighter bound for Norfolk News, VA, where they entered the U.S. on green cards. While Mike began graduate work at Duke University, Norma worked as a recreational therapist on the psychiatric ward of the hospital. Her daughter Carolyn was born in Durham on April 7, 1959. Norma's work at Duke sparked an interest in mental health, and in 1960 she entered the school of social work at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill on an N.I.M.H. scholarship. In 1962 she was awarded the M.S.S.W. degree, attending commencement while pregnant with her daughter Helen, who was born on September 1, 1962.

### *NIGERIAN YEARS*

In December 1962, Norma flew to Lagos, Nigeria with Mike and their daughters. (Mike was joining a team of librarians sent there by the Ford Foundation to help establish a national library.) From their home, Norma ran a pre-kindergarten program.

Among its students were the children of Norma's lifelong friends Sarah Garrison and Emily Orick. They died before Norma, but she stayed in touch with their children. In her free time, Norma swam and honed her tennis skills. While on leave back in Durham, NC, Norma gave birth to her daughter Marian on February 19, 1965.

Norma met Chukwumah Udeh in Nigeria when he was a twelve-year-old boy living with his brother Martin, who was Norma's cook and housekeeper. His family could not pay for more than his sixth-grade education. Norma found a progressive high school for Chukwumah, and she and Mike paid his fees.

### *MADISON - EARLY DAYS*

In the fall of 1966, Mike accepted a position as African Studies Bibliographer in the Memorial Library of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and the family moved to a home in Madison's Greentree neighborhood, then on the edge of the city. Norma gave birth to her son John on December 8, 1966. The family remained in Greentree less than a year, moving into the Dudgeon-Monroe neighborhood in the summer of 1967. Their first home there was at 2259 West Lawn Avenue. In 1968 Chukwumah, whose life had been in danger during the Nigerian civil war, came to live with Norma and her family there. He graduated

from Edgewood College and went on to earn his M.D. at the Medical College of Wisconsin. He and his wife Cindy moved to San Bernardino, CA, where he still practices obstetrics and gynecology. Norma always spoke of him as her foster son.

Norma and Mike moved in 1989 to 2404 Fox Avenue. Norma developed a cottage garden there. Her memorial photograph shows her in front of a bed of cosmos flowers.

### ***FEMINIST AND ATTORNEY***

Norma's first paid job in Madison was as a social worker with Family Services. Next, with U.S. Department of Labor funding, Norma conducted a research study designed to determine why there were so few women apprentices in skilled trades and to identify how their numbers could be increased.<sup>1</sup>

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i *Women in apprenticeship, why not?* prepared by Norma Briggs. Washington, D.C. : Department of Labor, Manpower Administration : For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974. Manpower research monograph (United States. Dept. of Labor. Manpower Administration) ; no. 33

Next, she worked as Executive Secretary of the Wisconsin Governor's Commission on the Status of Women. The Commission's advocacy was instrumental in bringing about historic reform in Wisconsin's property, divorce and sexual assault laws.

During November 18–21, 1977, Norma was a member of the Wisconsin delegation at the National Women's Conference in Houston, TX. 20,000 women attended. Their goal was to hammer out a Plan of Action to be presented to the Carter Administration and Congress for consideration and/or adoption.

The Commission was abolished in 1979 by a newly-elected Republican governor. Norma became director of the Equal Rights Division of the Wisconsin Department of Labor, Industry and Human Relations. Under her direction, the Division investigated and enforced claims of employment discrimination filed under Wisconsin's fair employment law.

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2 *Real women, real lives : marriage, divorce, widowhood.* Editor and part author, Norma Briggs, Executive Secretary to the Wisconsin Governor's Commission on the Status of Women. Madison : The Commission, 1979, c1978.

In 1981, Norma left state employment to enter law school at the University of Wisconsin. She graduated in 1984. After clerking for Judge Charles Dykman of the Wisconsin Court of Appeals, Norma embarked on a legal career that spanned two decades.

She spent some time working for agencies (DPI, the Madison School Board) but most of Norma's career was as a solo practitioner and, later, in partnership with Mike after his retirement from a state job. The bulk of her work as a lawyer had to do with helping people with personal problems. She believed that the law should be a helping profession and carried that belief into her practice.

### ***ATHLETE, SINGER, DANCER, GAMER,***

As a girl Norma practiced ju-jitsu and played lacrosse and tennis. Tennis was a lifelong activity for her. She was also a dancer, called New England contra dances and earned the full teaching certificate of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. She was an active member of the society's John Muir (Wisconsin) Branch for almost 40 years, building the future by teaching children's classes and by mentoring other dancers as they developed their teaching skills. She was an expert Scrabble player and, as a lawyer, knew how to interpret the rules to

her own advantage. In recent years, she liked to play Spider Solitaire on her laptop. She left a game unfinished.

Norma did not play an instrument, but she loved to sing. She and Mike would often sing with each other late at night while Mike played the piano. She did not much care for modern popular music, but she appreciated baroque and classical music with flowing melodies and relatively simple harmonies. Her all-time favorite was probably the slow movement of Beethoven's fifth piano concerto.

### ***DESIGNER AND GARDENER***

As the 1980s ended and the 1990s began, Norma and Mike began to search for a place where they could build a home to age in place and where Norma would have space enough to realize her dream garden.

In July of 1999, they moved into their house at 1519 Storytown Road, Oregon. Norma designed the house with windows on all sides, so that it is filled with light. She included in it a small pool for her daily swim and a sauna where she and Mike could chat while sweating. The house is fully accessible, with wide hallways and a walk-in shower. A parking area

south of the garage is marked out as half of a tennis court. The best view from the house is to the southwest over a valley that lies behind the terminal moraine of the last glacier, which left a variety of rocks large and small on the 10-acre parcel.

About half of the acreage is cropped by a neighbor. The rest consists of woodland, restored prairie, lawns and flowerbeds filled each with a succession of perennials. Norma's favorite season was spring, which brought her beloved trillium, but she also loved the fullness of summer for her peonies, fall for the color of her maples, and winter for the shapes of her ornamental grasses standing up amid the snowdrifts. Each year the flags of Scotland, Wales and England fly proudly near the house.

Norma's concern for the environment was not limited to her home. She and Mike owned rental property in Madison where they used green power and installed photovoltaic panels. "We do what we do now because it will pay off in the long run," Norma said when interviewed. "It's likely we won't see the results in our lifetime, but future generations will certainly benefit."

<http://www.mge.com/environment/green-power/green-businesses/GPTBiz.htm?id=309>

Norma was socially and politically active. Among her causes were women's health, correctional reform, and progressive politics. On the web, she is pictured with Mike at a 2011 rally to recall the state's governor.

<http://www.wivoices.org/2012/01/12/voices-from-the-rally-crowd-pt-3/>

Norma was an active member of the Wisconsin Hardy Plant Society, the Olbrich Botanical Society, the Oregon Garden Club, and the Friends of the Arboretum. She loved wandering through gardens, locally and in faraway places. Her travels with Mike during the last few years took her to gardens in Britain, Brazil, New Zealand and Barbados. She particularly liked the tropical garden near Hilo on the big island of Hawaii, and was enchanted last Christmas by the Marina Gardens in Singapore.

### ***DEATH***

At sunset on April 29, 2015, Norma set out to inspect her garden, as she had countless times before. She got as far as a path leading into her woods, where she likely tripped and fell near a patch of bleeding hearts.

We will never know why she could not get up. Helen found her about 9 a.m. the next day, breathing but unresponsive. Efforts to revive her failed, and she died just before noon, close to members of her family.

It is thought that she died of hypothermia. If so, her end was peaceful, which she would have chosen. She often said that she did not want a lingering death, either from a painful illness or following a prolonged physical and mental decline. She left us, too soon, but her last waking moment was in the garden she created for her family and friends to enjoy.

Norma was for many years a member of a Unitarian-Universalist society whose bond of union states that we are one with the natural world and with one another. That was her belief in life, and it holds true after her death.

Farewell, dear heart. I loved you then, I love you now, and I will always love you.

Mike

Three of Norma's favorite charities were:

Women's Medical Fund

<http://wmfwisconsin.org>

Li Chiao-Ping Dance

<http://www.lichiaopingdance.org>

Olbrich Botanical Gardens

<http://www.olbrich.org>

Please consider making a memorial gift to any of them.

These are the words to the dance with which Norma liked to end a community dance program:

*Oh, how lovely is the evening, is the evening,  
When the bells are sweetly ringing, sweetly ringing,  
Ding, dong, ding, dong, ding, dong.*