
Transitions—In Memory of Rena Osmer

Remembering Rena

— Cynthia Aldinger

Rena Osmer was a master Waldorf early childhood teacher, a natural and loving supporter of parents, and an inspiring adult educator, as well as a devoted parent, grandparent, sister, and friend. She had a way of making you feel welcomed, invited on the journey of learning about life and living, with her not at the helm, but by your side.

Born in 1951 in Detroit, Michigan, Rena was the oldest of four children and, in her own words, had a wonderful childhood, rich with extended family life, until she left for college at Western Michigan University in 1969. Of course, she participated in anti-nuclear and anti-war demonstrations, but also studied education and received her teaching credential for kindergarten through sixth grade.

Her first teaching experience was years later, teaching kindergarten and first grade in a one-room cabin in the woods in northern Michigan to the nine children of a land-based community where she was living and raising her two young boys. In 1985, when her younger son was ready for first grade, they moved to New Hampshire where she began teacher training at Antioch and teaching kindergarten at Pine Hill Waldorf School. Parents and colleagues from that time still speak of the gifts Rena brought to their children and their community.

Within five years of teaching kindergarten, she was also called to teach early childhood teachers part-time for Antioch New England during school vacations. In 1995 she was invited to join the board of the Waldorf Kindergarten Association (later to become WECAN) and served for ten years. She also was at the helm of organizing the first national Waldorf Kindergarten conference and the first international Waldorf Early Childhood Conference in Wilton, New Hampshire at Pine Hill/High Mowing School. It was during this time that our twenty-five year friendship began.

By 1998, after Rena and I left our beloved Waldorf



Schools to research birth to three and childcare, we became part of the Birth-to-Three/Child Care Committee, along with Janet Kellman. That's when our travels began, visiting Family Resource Centers and childcare settings, both Waldorf and non-Waldorf. While visiting a homeless shelter in San Francisco where colleague Carol Cole offered a Waldorf preschool, the name LifeWays appeared in our breakfast conversation to describe the type of care ("the ways of life") we wanted to develop for young children who needed to be in childcare.

What a gift it was to get to know this shining jewel of a woman! Many may not know how funny she was. Her laugh was melodic and generous. Her capacity for listening was almost unmatched. And her care and concern for others was genuine and full of compassion.

Rena was also a researcher and did her Master's thesis on brain research at Antioch. She also trained and became certified in RIE 1 (Resources for Infant Educators). Eventually she took a position as director of the Early Childhood Center at the Cape Ann Waldorf School in Beverly, Massachusetts until she was soon called to move to California where both of her grown sons were living. In 2000, Rena moved to Sebastopol, California, where she taught parent-infant



groups and a parent education course and also started working part-time for Rudolf Steiner College. By 2002, she became full time Director of Early Childhood Education at RSC and oversaw the development and expansion of new early childhood programs, to include “Women’s Empowerment” (a parenting education program for homeless mothers) and RSC LifeWays Children’s Center offering parent-child and childcare options for local families. She directed and taught the various Waldorf early childhood teacher training programs and graduated her last class at RSC in summer 2007.

During Rena’s final two years at Rudolf Steiner College, she commuted back and forth to Florida where she offered loving support to her family as her father, and then her brother, a disabled veteran, died within weeks of each other. At Whitsun 2006, Rena followed her heart and made the decision to settle in Florida near her sister and family. One major challenge—there was no Waldorf school nearby where she could do her life’s work. So what did she do? She became a barista at a coffee shop! Oh my, how we laughed as she described her adventures learning how to work the window and keep up with the orders. Her best analogy of her early experience was from an episode of *I Love Lucy* where Lucy and Ethel worked in a chocolate factory and could not keep up with wrapping and packaging the candy as it moved down the conveyer belt. That was Rena. In the most challenging of situations she could thread out a picture that brought humor or poignant tenderness. However, she was never one to complain and was quick to turn any conversation away from herself and back toward whomever she was with.

Clearly the Waldorf world was not finished with Rena. Even though the coffee shop soon recognized her

as worthy of becoming a manager—she had figured out how to work the window!—her heart belonged to teaching. As the fates would have it, a new initiative was starting up in Boca Raton, and Rena offered her application to become their kindergarten teacher. She served her beloved Sea Star Waldorf School from 2006 until her retirement in 2019. The school recently honored her with the planting of a mango tree on the school grounds, celebrated by children and parents she had taught over the years, and offering a lovely evening showing of the Madonna series of paintings accompanied by gentle music.

Rena learned of her cancer diagnosis in August 2019 and crossed the threshold in her sleep on October 18. Within days before she passed, Rena told her sister, “My work is done here.” Her family took her for one last drive to her beloved ocean. She was a water girl through and through. As she was in life, so she was in death, serving and doing whatever it was that needed to be done. She had dinner with her family on that Friday, drifted off to sleep that night, and quietly answered the call to expand her shining self back out into the spiritual world. It is heartwarming to imagine Joan Almon and other dear ones welcoming her as she crossed. Oh, my goodness. I can hear their laughter! ♦

Cynthia Aldinger is founder of LifeWays North America and traveled with Rena years ago to research the needs of children in childcare. She and Rena served many years together on the board of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America. A mother and grandmother, Cynthia’s passion is the preservation of the playful spirit of childhood.