On the Passing of Henri

By Bill Cranor

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My friend, and yours. An eccentric’s eccentric. In this particular incarnation, among many other things, Henri had conceived and staffed a nature camp for her kids—"Camp Hen”— spending not a little time on Middle River. She was a devotee of love, music, nature, kids and riverbank philosophy.

She puttered prodigiously on her amazing house and garden. If you never had a tour you really missed something special. Her place was a dazzling assemblage of the lost, the found, the misplaced, river finds, bartered and painted objects, the curious, the beautiful and the comfortable. House and garden were always morphing into a sort of Sioux Hobo Chic.

A few years ago we took an excursion on the Middle River above Franks Mill that was memorable. Henri had recently taken an ill-advised turn towards “dog ownership,” having obtained a mongrel pup from an unnamed and mischievous guardian angel.

Booray II, as it turned out, was soon to outshine her predecessor.

Henri described Booray with unapologetic pride as 100% Appalachian Cur! An independent appraisal would describe Booray as full-grown, 45 pound, spooky, leash-yanking wildness— enthusiastically suspicious and clawingly friendly. Booray favored a clean lap with muddy paws for a fortunate few. Yep, 45 pounds of bounding free-will, 100% Appalachian Cur.

Planning our next river trip, Henri announced she would bring Booray so the dog could “get used to being on a boat”— an exaggerated and impractical notion to the most casual observer.

I, being an unprejudiced juror who was in a reckless mood, agreed to be “Committee Boat” and partner in this one-off boating event involving two people, two boats, a river and 45 pounds of Appalachian Cur.

This Regatta attempted a never-to- be-repeated event… the Middle River Boat/Mutt Challenge. This Regatta started like most do with the usual shuttles, and shuffle of gear, boats, and participants. The novel experience of shuttling Henri, boats and 45 pounds of panting Appalachian Cur in my beat-up Jeep pickup stands out as an event itself. Dog with panting breath-on-face, once in the middle of the bench seat and now on your lap, snapped occasionally at the big-ass horsefly trapped on the dusty dash. Finally, at the riverbank the calm in Henri’s voice— meant to soothe and hypnotize Booray— fell on the deaf ears of an excited and anxious Appalachian Cur. Nonetheless, after much coaxing, wrestling, and muttering both Sioux Hobo and anxious beast were abroad on the water.

Henri had managed to wrestle/coax Booray onto the smooth rounded bow of her 10-foot kayak—painted dark green bow to stern with flowers, messages and symbols by the kids of Camp Hen. Craft and crew presented a most pagan and ludicrous picture. Naturally, Booray— anxious about her precarious perch on something as polished as an apple and bobbing like a cork— saw the nearby shoreline of tumbled rocks and trees as an anodyne for her anxiety. A movement on the bank caught her eye—A SQUIRREL!!!— nerve and muscle sprang into action. With leash ripped from her grasp, Henri nearly capsized as she simultaneously cursed, splashed, screamed and yelled, “Boo-RAY come back here gaw dammit!” The otherwise peaceful river echoed with commotion.

Downriver after regaining some composure Henri had Booray back on board and cooed encouragement to her for “being a good girl.” Henri seemed to have regained her optimism. But high adventure awaited us all just around the next river bend. Drifting down current, coming into sight was a tulip poplar, a forest giant fallen, completely bridging the river. There was just enough space (we guessed) to admit passage underneath for two boats, two people and an Appalachian Cur.

I volunteered to go first and— gathering spiderwebs from the overhanging branches— I succeeded in my transit with a Limbo-like move that circumstance recommended. Successful, I turned my canoe to monitor my fleet mates. Their approach— both cautious and uncertain— took a decided turn for the alarming and comedic.

Just as the bow of Henri’s kayak started under the tree, Booray nimbly jumped from the precarious bow of the kayak to the beckoning security of the downed tree trunk. What ensued in the next few minutes was a marvel of boating skill, luck, manual dexterity and a battle of wills between Henri, Booray, the Middle River, and the log. Henri had to let go of the leash to pass under the log. Booray was relieved to be on solid log, standing triumphantly over Henri. Henri completed the passage, managed to snatch the hanging leash and gave me the unforgettable image of Henri in her kayak, leash stretched out behind her as she floated downstream, Booray tethered yet stubbornly resisting on the huge tree trunk. It was about this time Henri lost her paddle—“My Paddle!!”— was added to the liturgy of pleadings to an indifferent (if not a little amused) cosmos. In fact, it was all I could do to wipe the tears from my eyes and recapture my breath to whisper, “I got the paddle.”

The rest of the trip seemed mild by comparison, until we got to our take-out at Franks Mill where Booray spotted a flock of swallowtail butterflies that were dipping for minerals on the bank. She made one last determined lunge, dumping the boat, occupants and gear in the muddy shallows at the riverbank. All was collected soon enough and Henri— muddy head to toe— said confidently, “She’d do better next time.” I muttered to myself, “Never again!”

And alas, now that is certainly true.

Henri, we will miss you.