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Jo Ann Kairys

Holmdel's Fairy Tale Adventurer

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and put down roots in Holmdel

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Fairy



Tale Adventurer

Jo Ann Kairys grew up on the outskirts of Philadelphia, the youngest of three girls. Her father was a salesman and her mother worked for the Draft Bureau. As an early reader, Jo Ann was always fascinated by the colors, words, and places in picture books and was especially drawn to fairy tales. Jo Ann would stay up well past her bedtime and after her parents had gone to bed reading under the covers with a flashlight. Her adult life reads much like a fairy tale - full of adventure, travel to far away lands, excitement, love and her very own handsome prince and a big, happy family ending.

Jo Ann, who followed her husband Steve back and forth across the globe as his medical career soared, was able to adapt to each new location and find or create jobs for herself under difficult and unusual circumstances. From teaching high school English to gang members in South Philadelphia and Lamaze classes to pregnant women on both

coasts, to working in the medical field in the United States and all over Europe, Jo Ann has seen and done more than most women born out of the Women's Rights Movement.

During her extensive travels in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe she was able to master several languages, while she helped impoverished or outdated medical facilities improve and advance their medical and out-patient care. An established and respected medical and scientific writer, admired and much published in medical journals, Jo Ann has recently gone back to her childhood love of fairy tales and is trying her hand at writing children's books.

Jo Ann and her husband Steve have been married for 43 years and have now settled in Holmdel with Alona, the youngest of their four children. *Living In Holmdel* sat down with Jo Ann in her comfortable living room to hear her remarkable story.

By Teja Anderson

LIH: You grew up on the outskirts of Philadelphia. When did you leave?

JK: I didn't leave Philly until after I was married for a year. I went to grammar school, high school and college there. I met my husband, Steve, at Temple University when we were both undergraduates there, both premed.

LIH: Was it love at first sight?

JK: Well, we were lab partners in an Animal Anatomy class, dissecting cats. We didn't start dating until two years later when he was already in medical school and I was an English and Biology teacher in a South Philadelphia high school. I had to postpone medical school for a couple of years and make money, so I taught.

LIH: You must have been a very young teacher. Was it difficult to get your students to respect you?

JK: Yes, I was very young. It was during the late '60s and race riots were taking place in many of the big cities. So, there were gangs and shootings and decapitations on the subways and every teacher had a bodyguard and an FBI Agent escort them daily through school. There were interrogation rooms, lots of guns, the cities were burning...it was terrifying actually.

LIH: That must have been quite an experience. Did you think of moving to somewhere less volatile?

JK: Of course. But we needed to wait for Steve to graduate from medical school before we could go somewhere else. However, after my first year of teaching I was promoted and was put in charge of the new special education program at the school to teach challenged chil-

dren how to read and enjoy reading.

LIH: These were high school students that didn't know how to read yet?

JK: They only had basic reading skills. They were primarily minorities. Lots of gang members who showed up once or twice a week, if that. South Philadelphia High School was a tough, tough place.

LIH: Did anything really scary or dangerous ever happen to you?

JK: Yes. On the elevator one day, as the doors opened, a student that I was standing next to got shot in the head. I was pregnant at the time. Shortly after that one of my students was thrown on to the subway tracks and decapitated. These were gang issues.

LIH: How terrifying! How much longer did you stay there?

JK: It was another year and a half after that before we moved. Our son Daniel was born, Steve finished medical school and he chose to go to the University of Chicago for his medical internship.

LIH: Chicago in the late '60s? Nothing like going out of the frying pan and into the fire!

JK: Yes, there were race riots there as well and the Blackstone Rangers - a notorious Chicago street gang - down by the University. Hyde Park, where we were, was a very dangerous area. We were young and had few resources and a young baby. Steve was on call every other night so I was pretty much alone in a building that was constructed for the 1936 World's Fair and was falling apart, dilapidated. It was an interesting year. It was the year we landed on the moon, the year "Sesame Street" started...the civil rights movement, the women's rights movement ...all



Above: Jo Ann Kairys and her husband, Steve, sit at the heart of this family portrait from October, 2009. On the right are son Daniel, 40, and daughter Kristina, 17; left are daughters Carole, 38, standing, and Alona, 15. Right: Kairys' husband Steve and their son, Daniel, then 2 ½, amid the splendor of Glacier National Park in 1969.



of that churning and burning and I became part of that. It was an amazing, eye opening experience.

LIH: Did you indeed go back to medical school?

JK: No, but fortunately I was able to take advanced classes in poetry writing with some amazing writers such as Richard (G.) Stern. But I have to say, there is a thread with the reading and the writing. I would read all the time to our son, Daniel. When it was safe enough to go out, we would go to the bookstore and bring back books to read. Fortunately though, it was just one quick year.

LIH: Where did you go from there?

JK: It was during the Vietnam War and Steve had a very high draft number; he would have been drafted right out of internship. Fortunately, because he was a very exceptional student and intern, he applied for and was accepted into alternative military service in the public health service. We had a choice of going to an Indian reservation somewhere or to the NIH (National Institute of Health) in Washington, D.C. to work on cardiac research. We were young and thought we would just have an adventure so we opted for the Indian reservation in the high plains of Montana in the middle of absolutely nowhere. There was nothing there at all. Steve was one of three physicians and we stayed for two years.

LIH: But it must have been a nice, calmer change of pace.

JK: [Laughs] Well, there were two tribes on the (Belknap Indian) reservation. One was a Sioux tribe (Assiniboine) and the other was called Gros Vente (Big Belly). Our government in its infinite wisdom put two warring tribes together hoping that they would either get along or kill each other off.

LIH: So once again you found yourselves in the midst of conflict?

JK: Yes. We would literally stand by our window and watch the shootouts, actual shootouts, right outside our house!

LIH: So your husband was primarily treating gunshot wounds?

JK: Lots of gunshot wounds, a lot of trauma. We thought it was going to be a peaceful year but it was not. We felt being on the reservation was an opportunity to do something different for us but also an opportunity

to do something humanitarian. We were respected and well received by both the tribes.

LIH: Did you work as well?

JK: I did substitute teaching in the elementary school. I got the job because the teacher that I replaced had been shot at by one of the students, a fifth grader. The teacher was okay, but she had had enough and took a leave of absence. I thought if I could handle the gang leaders in South Philly, I could handle a bunch of fifth graders. I found the students to be extremely curious and bright and they loved listening to stories. So I would just make up stories and we would talk and draw. Most of them had never been off the reservation and they were so curious and like sponges so they would love to listen to me tell them stories of where I had been, what I had done and seen. I never got shot at and I absolutely loved Montana and teaching.

LIH: So you stayed on in Montana after your required two year stint?

JK: Yes, Steve had an opportunity to move to the state capital of Helena and be the Epidemiologist for the Department of Health and then the director of Maternal and Child Health. Altogether our family stayed five years.

LIH: But by now you were a family of four correct?

JK: Yes, we adopted our older daughter when we were still on the reservation. She is a Chippewa Cree Indian. Through teaching I got to know a lot of the Indian families and we really became part of the Indian community. We talked with the local social service agency about the possibility of adopting. They told us it wouldn't be easy, and might take a long time and not to have any expectations, but we went ahead with all the paperwork and a week later we got a call that there was a little 21 month old girl. We went to meet her and we fell in love and we drove her home! Daniel was 3 at that point, when he became a big brother to Carole Ann, and it was fun seeing them interact. It was just wonderful to have her as a part of our family.

LIH: Did you bring her up as an American or as a Native American?

JK: Both. We were still in Montana and we had access to all of the different Indian cultures and reservations throughout the state. We would go to the pow-wows whenever we could, the sun dances, the rain dances. We did it for her and for us as well. I always read her Native



A picture of love, (above): Kairys holds Carole, here 21 months, on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, Montana, in 1970. Fairytales do come true (far right), as on this special day in 2006 when the Kairys met Alona, age 12, in Moscow for the first time. Left to right are Steve, Alona, Jo Ann, and Kristina, then 14.

American stories. We decorated her room with Native American crafts, dream catchers and things.

LIH: Now you were raising two young children, did you continue to teach?

JK: In Montana, I started writing. The landscape there was just so beautiful and so different for me; I was such a hayseed from the city. Everything there sparked my imagination. I took the kids for a lot of nature walks and I would keep a journal and write. Also, when we were living outside the capital, I taught Lamaze. Through a correspondence course I became the only certified Lamaze teacher in the state of Montana. I started teaching childbirth classes in my home and eventually started the whole movement across the state that finally led to fathers being allowed to come into the delivery room for their children's births.

LIH: Wow, you really helped change the American way of life!

JK: Remember the time; our whole generation was changing. We were the hippie generation, we were rebellious, and the generation that broke away from tradition. If you knew us you wouldn't think that it was odd what we did, that we would adopt a child from a different culture, that we didn't do all the traditional things. Even though we both came from very traditional, extremely normal families, we got caught up in the lifestyles of our peers. But we were good, we were good kids. We were just having adventures.

LIH: What was your next adventure?

JK: I missed the softness of New England and the forest and I wanted to go home, "home" being the east coast. I told Steve and he was ready; it was time to move on. By sheer accident on a trip back to visit our families in Vermont and New Hampshire we got off the highway in Hanover, N.H. and saw that there was a medical center there. Steve went in and asked about pediatrics. The resident who was supposed to come in had just dropped out and they offered him the position right then and there. So we moved to New Hampshire.

LIH: Hanover, N.H. - that's Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. That's not just any medical center; it's one of the best teaching hospitals in the country!

JK: Yes. But Steve had such great qualifications, they grabbed him. We were there for 23 years!

LIH: What did you do, besides raising the kids of course?

JK: I had a fair amount of chutzpah and I loved teaching so I convinced the chairman of the Department of Maternal and Child Health at DHMC to give me a job teaching childbirth classes. One thing led to another and I became a faculty member, got my masters in Public Health at the University of Massachusetts, and was hired by the out-patient part of the medical center to manage half of their 32 clinical sections. I did everything from primary to tertiary care, pediatrics to neurosurgery, budgets, hiring, firing...everything! Then I was recruited by the hospital side of the medical center to be the Senior VP of Marketing and Planning. I helped establish a women's health center, which back then was unheard of. Then I started working with some world renowned physicians who did research in different clinical areas, who found that there was a need for and that I had an ability to write the results of their research from raw material, prose and data. So I was a ghost writer.

LIH: At what point did you start traveling to the Soviet Union?

JK: In the late 1980s I learned about our federal government's interest in modernizing the Soviet Union's health care system. The Foreign Relations Committee of the Senate allocated millions of dollars to the United States Agency for International Development and they were awarding grants to medical centers and doctors and healthcare professionals to use to go into the Soviet Union and partner with hospitals and clinics to help bring their health care into the 21st century. Our first trip was in 1989, on a three year grant. The kids were older then so they didn't go with us.

LIH: What was your area of expertise and how did you manage with the language?

JK: Steve's expertise was pediatric health care and mine was quality improvement. We did a lot of teaching and conferences. I learned to speak Russian from a private tutor, a student at Dartmouth who spoke Russian as his first language. For three months I studied intensively - like a maniac - because I wanted to be able to understand what I was seeing and hearing beyond the surface. By the first trip I was speaking, reading and writing at a conversational level. It was all about the story. I needed to know the story behind the story, the layers and it was necessary to do that through the language and not through an interpreter. We went back dozens and dozens of times over the years.



This photo, left, from Christmas 2010 captures the blessings of a growing family: Kairys' daughter Carole and her husband, Roger, with children Mitchell (4) and Cheyenne (1), at home in Pepperell, MA.



Right: Jo Ann at her son Daniel's home in Miramar, FL, April 2009, with her two "grand girls," (left tonight) Jaleen, 3, Jada, 5, and grand-son Jaden, 6 months.

LIH: What was it like being there as the country went through so much change?

JK: Being there when they opened the Hermitage (Museum) to westerners, when they opened their doors to us for the first time, was amazing. You could take pictures and see art work that no one had ever seen. I had studied art in school but there were artists I had never even heard of! It was wonderful; the art, the colors, the music, the countryside... it was unbelievable. All the Russian fairytales I was able to read in Russian and English and the language and stories just fascinated me. All of that found its way into my own writing.

LIH: Was it safe?

JK: Well, not all the time. We had a partnership with three hospitals in Zagreb in Croatia during the war in Yugoslavia and we wore "flak jackets" (clothing to protect from shrapnel) a lot of the time. You know about the genocides in Bosnia? Well we were right there in the middle of it.

LIH: At what point did you and your husband decide you wanted to adopt again?

JK: During our travels we were taken into orphanages. Romania, in particular, I remember because of the AIDS epidemic there and the number of children orphaned and the horrible conditions. It touched our hearts very deeply and we knew we needed to do something. We visited other orphanages back in Russia as well. Then we found an agency in Maryland back in the states that had a special program to host children in hopes of adopting them and we hosted a 12 year old girl, Kristina, for five weeks. Because I spoke Russian we developed a relationship very quickly. But then she had to go back and it was every parent's worst nightmare. We didn't know if we would ever see her again and there were mountains of paperwork, but I was a maniac again and I was able to get her home with us in just three months.

LIH: How did the next adoption come about?

JK: We had moved to Princeton in 2002 as Steve was offered an incredible position at Robert Wood Johnson Medical Center, another teaching hospital. We adopted Kristina in 2003 and moved here to Holmdel. A lot of local families had heard about our story and were interested in adopting as well. We went with some of these families over to Russia to help out; we were not looking to adopt ourselves, we were quite content. In

2006, we did what is called a blind referral and that brought us to Alona, who was also 12. But the adoption process had changed dramatically because there had been several cases of abuse of Russian adoptees in the U.S. and the (Russian) government had really clamped down. It required three trips, court, lots and lots of paperwork. The last trip I made alone. It was horrible... scary, people claiming to be relatives demanding money. Until the paperwork was completed, Alona and I holed up in a

big hotel in downtown Moscow, only going out during the day and bribing people if we had to with American dollars to get food and things. While we were cooped up I would read her stories and fairy tales in Russian called Skazka. She didn't speak any English and had been in the orphanage for five years with very little to read. That got us through and I was able to bring her back here to our family.

LIH: At what point did you decide to try your hand at writing for children instead of just reading to them?

JK: Our son, Daniel, started a family. I have two lovely granddaughters, Jada and Joleen, and I started doing digital scrapbook stories for them (Also, now a grandson, Jaden). I wanted to do a story for them that had a Russian character in it called "Baba Yaga," a very famous character in Russian folklore. I was sending these children's books to them and I thought, "Hey, I'll try publishing." The first book I published was "Princess Secrets" and the two main characters are Jada and Joleen.

The second one uses the same characters again and is called "Sunbelievable." It goes to press soon. It's a bedtime story about the magical sun. It's a universal theme about children filled with wonder, imagination and curiosity.

LIH: I love the title, how did you come up with it?

JK: Actually, I was stopped at a red light here on Holland Road. I said to myself, "I can't stand this red light any more, it's unbelievable!" And it hit me - "Sunbelievable!" That's the name of the book! That's how it came about.

LIH: Well, you have had an unbelievable life. Thank you so much for sharing it with us and good luck with your writing.

JK: Thank you.

Favorite Restaurant:
Houlihan's

Favorite Music:
Folk Songs

Favorite Movies:
"Jane Eyre"

Pet Peeve:
People who talk incessantly
without being relevant

*Three People You'd
Like to Dine With:*
President Barak Obama,
Eleanor Roosevelt and Jane Austin