

THE PLAINFIELD PROJECT

A Community Caring for One of Its Own

By Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk



In Memory of Arvilla L. Dyer

January 21, 1923 – September 23, 2004

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Cover drawing by Paula King

Profits from the sale of this book will go to
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Introduction

I first met Arvilla in the summer of 1973. She had recently retired from the Army and moved back to Plainfield to take care of her elderly parents. My husband, Frank, and I had just bought our house on Main Street across from the church. Over the next thirty-one years, Arvilla was a steady, reliable presence in my life, always there if I had a question about the town or a medical scare with one of my children. I looked forward to waking up every Christmas morning to hear her hearty voice on the telephone: "Merry Christmas, neighbor!" When our daughter, Susanna, got married in 2001, Arvilla was there to issue the marriage license and ring the church bell after the ceremony.

Frank and I were shocked and saddened in the fall of 2003, when Arvilla walked over to our house, sat down at the kitchen table, and told us that she had been diagnosed with stomach cancer. But because both of us work full time in New York City, we weren't around much during the next year. Several times, when we were up for a weekend, Nancy Sykes, pastor of the Plainfield Congregational Church, would talk about the way the town had mobilized to take care of Arvilla and then add, "Somebody should be writing this up." On the day of the funeral, Nancy was more direct: "Rebecca, I think you might be the one."

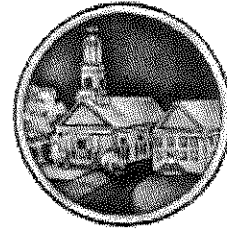
And so, in January 2005, during a ten-day vacation in Plainfield, I began to make phone calls and set up interviews. From the beginning, this project had an energy of its own. When I couldn't find my copy of Arvilla's holiday letter, I called Thelma Pilgrim, who looked on her computer and called me right back: "I'll drop it off at your house in ten minutes." During an early interview with the Persings, Bob excused himself for a minute, went upstairs, and came back with a microcassette in his hands: "You might be interested in this. During the last few months of her life, Arv recorded her earliest memories of life in Plainfield." When I had trouble transcribing this tape because

Arvilla's voice, usually so strong, was very weak, my sister, Carol, arrived with a professional-quality transcribing machine for me to borrow. When I told Peg Connell that I needed some pictures of Memorial Day 2004, she came over the next day and handed me a CD with the photos. Arvilla's niece, Nancy Allen, mailed me a collection of articles about Arvilla that had appeared in various publications over the years. Some of them are reproduced here. Dave Alvord helped by obtaining permissions and photographs from the *Hampshire Gazette*. Paula King contributed her drawing for the cover of the book. And Margot Locke generously donated her professional services to oversee the book's production. As always when I am immersed in a writing project, my family has been incredibly supportive. I am deeply grateful to Frank, Susanna, Alex, Carol, and Bob. I also wish to thank the members of my writing group, Susan Babinski, Jane Isenberg, and Pat Juell, who got to know Arvilla by reading and responding to various drafts. Finally, Arvilla herself contributed in an active way by leaving us her recorded memoir as well as the notebook she kept in the spring of 2004, which was a great help in checking names and dates. I think she would approve of our decision to donate all profits from the sale of this book to the Town Hall Restoration Fund.

Throughout the spring, as I listened to the voices on the tapes and transcribed the interviews, the pieces fell into place in an almost magical way. This story seemed to be writing itself. Of course, for every person I interviewed, there were many others whom I didn't speak with because of time limitations. But this book is dedicated to you all—everyone who loved and cared for Arvilla. Your efforts have helped to define all that is best in the life of Plainfield.

—Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk, April 2005

“If you have never lived in a small town, you have no idea of the love and support one gets in time of need.”



In the winter of 2003-2004, Arvilla Dyer did something she had been meaning to do for many years. She wrote a holiday letter to send out to her many friends and acquaintances. Arvilla had a lot of news to share that year. First there was her surprise 80th birthday present, a trip to Hawaii, where she had been stationed in the Army from 1956 to 1959. Here's how she explained it in the letter:

I am still the Town Clerk in this little town so when a special town meeting was called for January 21, naturally I was present. After the business of the evening was completed, there was a surprise birthday party, for it was my 80th birthday. The big surprise was a present such as only the residents of a small, closely knit community would plan—a trip back to Hawaii. Over 100 residents and friends from other towns took part in this all expense paid round trip. In May one of my nieces went with me and we stayed at the Hale Koa, the military hotel on Waikiki.

Arvilla went on to describe the highlights of her trip to Hawaii. Then, in closing, she related another piece of unexpected news:

On our return, my 92-year-old sister, Priscilla, came and spent the summer with me. She has Alzheimer's Disease and it was not an easy summer as I was not feeling top notch myself. After many tests I was diagnosed with stomach cancer—what a shocker! But you know, if you know me, that I'm going to lick this darned thing.

Arvilla ended her letter by describing the beginnings of what she would later come to refer to as the “town project”:

If you have never lived in a small town you have no idea of the love and support one gets in time of need. Since my only family lives down in Florida, the whole town has become my family. They have committees for everything: drive me to my chemotherapy treatments, stay with me nights when I need it, do my laundry, bring me food, do my errands and shovel snow and yes, we really have had that this winter.

In a way, the townspeople were only giving back what Arvilla had given to them and others from surrounding communities in the more than thirty years since she had retired from the Army as a Lieutenant Colonel in 1972 and returned to Plainfield, where she lived with and cared for her elderly parents, C. Frederick and M. Arvilla (Sampson) Dyer. The following list is only a sampling of Arvilla's community service:

Town Clerk (26 years); Burial Agent (24 years); President of the Cemetery Association (26 years); member of the Plainfield Congregational Church (70 years—Deacon, 26 years, and Chairman of the Music Committee, over 20 years); Secretary and Treasurer of the Ladies Benevolent Society (23 years); Editor of the *Plainfield Post*, the town's biweekly newspaper (33 years); Commander of the Cummington Post #304 of the American Legion (28 years) and Adjutant (18 years); Past Matron of Chapter 171 of the Order of the Eastern Star; a longtime Grange member and member of the National Grange (over 57 years); Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) with the Cummington Ambulance (14 years), serving as a first responder for many years after that.

The idea of giving back to one's community was "bred in the bone" for Arvilla Dyer. Close family members had held the position of Town Clerk for 102 years "off and on." One of these previous Clerks was her grandfather, Charles N. Dyer, who also served as

Postmaster and published a History of Plainfield in 1892. Her mother was librarian of the Shaw Memorial Library in town for 43 years and died “at work in the library” at the age of 93 in 1976. Every day, while Arvilla was growing up, her mother would ask her: “Have you done your service today?” According to Judy Williams, when people would remark on Arvilla’s many community activities, she would say, “Well, this is the way I was raised. In my family my parents always were involved with the community. So it was a given that you would be involved with the church and the library and other organizations.”

In one sense, by coming together to take care of Arvilla during her illness, the town was just repaying her for many years of devoted service. But still the outpouring of support when she became ill seemed unprecedented. In 2004, people in the Hilltowns of Western Massachusetts, as in most other parts of America, were working hard—commuting, raising families, juggling child care, work, and household responsibilities. How did the town find the will and the energy for this project? And how did Arvilla Dyer—this proud, independent New England woman, who had never married and who was used to being in charge of everything—find the courage to tell people she needed help?

The answers to these questions go back a few months, to a time before Arv wrote her holiday letter and before her cancer had been diagnosed. She hadn’t been feeling well for several months, wasn’t able to eat very much at one time, and was losing weight. During the summer she’d scheduled appointments with several local physicians, but nothing had turned up on the tests they recommended. Then, one Sunday in the fall at the coffee hour after church, a new friend, Joyce Freeland, who had been away for eight weeks or so, expressed her shock at the difference in Arvilla’s appearance. She’d lost so much weight. Arv’s good friend Anna Hathaway, a lifetime Plainfield resident who organizes the coffee hours, overheard this conversation and remembers that Joyce talked to Arvilla “like a Dutch uncle.” Joyce recalls saying, “Look, you’re retired military. You can get the best care. You’ve got to get an accurate diagnosis. I’ll drive you to the appointment.”

A few weeks later, Joyce got a phone call from Arv: “Is your

offer still good?" Arvilla had set up an appointment at West Point on October 24. In the car on the way down there, Arvilla said to Joyce: "I know I'm going to need someone to help me get through this. Would you be willing to do it?" Although Joyce really didn't know Arvilla very well, she said yes.

And from that point on, throughout her illness, Arvilla deferred to Joyce for all decisions, big and small, involving her care. Anna Hathaway explained: "She just relied utterly on Joyce to deal with all those annoying little things, getting the appointments and following up, driving her here and there. Arvilla just sensed that Joyce was somebody she could depend and rely on. I think she put the burden down then. She just put it down." Joyce is a Certified Public Accountant who worked in Washington, D.C., for many years as a financial consultant for nonprofit agencies. She also served overseas in a project sponsored by the Agency for International Development. Her job was to figure out how much it would cost to effectively address the most common killers of children under five.

Looking back on her year as Arvilla's friend and advocate, Joyce explained to me in our first interview, "There were a lot of times when people—doctors, nurses, other people—just got into it. People took their time in explaining things and caring for her. There was some kind of energy around the whole thing. I think it was her energy." But Joyce added that not everything happened because of a kind of magical synergy: "Of course, Arvilla also had a way to make things happen." Most of all, Joyce remembers "such wonderful people. It was just an amazing thing to be a part of."

There were several visits to West Point, followed by an appointment at Dana Farber Hospital on December 9. Joyce drove Arvilla to Boston for this appointment and was with her when the doctors gave her the verdict: "Stomach cancer. Inoperable." Arvilla received this news with a pronouncement that would become familiar in the months ahead: "You *know* I'm going to beat this thing."

Later Arvilla talked about how hard it was for her to tell this news to others. Joyce knew, of course, and Arvilla soon told Pastor Nancy Sykes. About two weeks after receiving the diagnosis, Arvilla made an announcement in church during the time for celebrations or concerns. Standing at the front of the church in her choir robe, she



Bob Corash

said: "I recently learned that I have cancer." She took a deep breath, and then in the strong, authoritative voice that was so often heard at town events, she continued: "But you know me, and you know that I'm going to fight this thing, and I'm going to beat it."

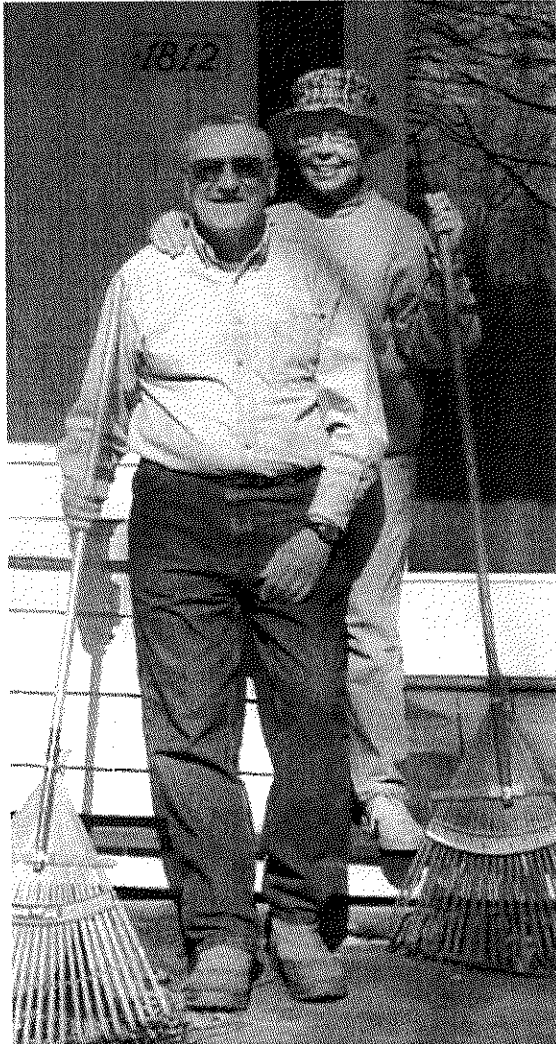
As 2003 drew to a close, Arvilla worked hard to put her affairs in order: Even before she got sick she had turned over the presidency of

the Historical Society to Judy Williams. Now, at the end of the year, she found a good home for Jeanie, her border collie, with Cathy Shugg, and she made sure there would be a competent new Town Clerk, Theresa Thatcher, and Editor for the *Plainfield Post*, Karen Fournier. At Joyce's suggestion, she contacted her lawyer, Bob Corash, who was also a friend and Plainfield resident, and worked with him to get her financial affairs in order. Bob insisted that she go over her will carefully, and he agreed to handle all of her bills and other financial transactions. According to Joyce, after her conversation with Bob, Arvilla said, "I do not have to worry about any of those money matters at all." And throughout her illness, she did not worry because Bob handled everything.

"I haven't been asked to do anything. I want to help too."

Although Arvilla had many friends and was active in many organizations, she was, as Joyce explained, "so private. She probably hadn't had anybody in her house for almost thirty years." People who came to the house on town business would talk to Arvilla on the porch or next door in the Town Clerk's office. Once Arvilla started having chemotherapy treatments, she was pretty frail, and Joyce realized "there was no way I could do everything myself." In fact, it was during her first chemo treatment on December 31, 2003, that

plans for the town project began to take shape. Joyce was there, of course. June and Bob Persing, who knew Arvilla through the church and various other town activities, had volunteered to drive her to the Oncology Clinic in Pittsfield. And Nancy Sykes, pastor of the church, had taken advantage of the holiday (New Year's Eve) to drive over from Northampton, where she lives, to be with them during this first treatment. All of them, including Arvilla, remember the fun they had that day, talking and laughing as the treatment continued. It was around this time that June and Bob Persing agreed to coordinate the efforts of people from the community to help "take care of Arvilla."



Bob and June Persing

Committees were formed for transportation to and from medical appointments, for food, laundry, cleaning, mail pickup and delivery, garbage detail, snow removal, and volunteers to stay all night with Arvilla at the house when she wasn't feeling strong enough to be alone. June began keeping a month-at-a-glance calendar to be sure that all of Arvilla's needs would be taken care of. She remembers taking great satisfaction in this calendar in which there were never

any gaps. In fact, there were enough volunteers, that June always had a backup person listed in case someone got sick or had a conflict at the last minute. This backup system helped to relieve any sense of pressure for the many community caregivers.

Arvilla, who had kept her private life private for so long, was thrilled by this community effort. She would say, "I can't believe they're doing all of this for little old me." In fact, the support was so strong, that at one point June Persing left a note for Susi Westwood, the food coordinator, saying: "Please don't leave any more food. There's no more room in the refrigerator." In talking about the way the community rallied to take care of Arvilla, Bob Persing explained that "you never had to chase people to help out. We'd be down at the post office or something, and people that we'd never called would come up to us and say, 'Hey, I understand you take care of the drivers for Arv. Put my name down on the list.'" June remembers getting calls from people who would say: "I haven't been asked to do anything. I want to help too." Besides being good for Arvilla, this communal effort was good for the community. As June recalls: "People really pulled together. People who had not known each other before suddenly became good friends. There was a common thread."

I asked Stacey Magdycz how she managed to do so much when she had a job, a husband, and two young children. She replied with a question, "How could you not?" She explained that she got lots of support from her husband, Ken, and her mother, Donna Hudson. Her kids too were understanding. They drew pictures for their mom to take to Arvilla and often asked how she was doing.

From the beginning, the system of caregiving and support seemed to function flawlessly. Peg Connell, a friend and neighbor of Arvilla's, explained, "There was none of that feeling of 'I did this for her,' none of that one-upmanship. It was such a cooperative effort. Everybody's focus was Arvilla. I don't think it was anything that was planned. It was just the way it happened."

"She took care of all of us because she let us take care of her."

Joyce Freeland had agreed without hesitation to be Arvilla's health care agent. In this role, she would be the one to help Arvilla deal with the medical establishment, and give support and advice in



Joyce Freeland, Judy Feeley and Chris Stockman

making important health care decisions. Others in town soon realized that Joyce should not have to handle this responsibility alone. As with everything else related to the town project, the right people soon came forward. Judy Feeley explained, "I found out Joyce was going to all these appointments with Arvilla. And I thought, 'She needs some help.' So that's when Chris and I kind of jumped in and just started helping in whatever way we could." Chris Stockman, the third member of the team, explained that initially she didn't want to be one of the health care agents. She is a case manager in her job and preferred to be involved with Arvilla in a different capacity. But she changed her mind when she learned that Joyce was going to be away: "By then I had built a relationship with Arvilla, and it felt like it was an important thing to do because she wanted us."

Both Judy and Chris are registered nurses, who are also practitioners of reiki massage. They share an interest in and expertise with the physical and emotional concerns people face at the end of life. Chris explained how the three of them worked together: "You don't have a plan, but it sort of evolves as the process evolves. You know what is needed, you know who's got the strength, you know who to call in, you know who stays behind. It is sort of a dance."

None of the three had known Arvilla well before she got sick. Joyce knew her from casual conversations at coffee hour after church and one time when she went along on a walk with Arv and Priscilla to check out various historical sites. But during this walk, according to Joyce, "there was not a personal thing said. Everything was factual. There was a button mill here and a brick mill there, so we were picking up pieces of brick. It must have taken us three hours. Since I was an assessor, Arvilla had to swear me in. And register me to vote, and the street list every year. She'd call and ask: 'Are you still alone?'"

Chris added: "That's how I remember her, from going up and getting a dog license, getting a fishing license, and occasional meetings of What Nots [a women's group in town founded by Arvilla's sister and others during World War II]. But she'd always remember our dogs, 'Do you still have Ebbie? Do you still have Jasper?' And she'd remember Henry, my grandson."

Judy explained that she knew Arvilla "a little bit" from town meetings and What Nots. Arvilla had sometimes called Judy's husband, Jim, who is very handy, when she needed help with things in the house. Shortly after moving to Plainfield, Judy remembers sitting in her living room and saying to Jim: " 'What would we do without Arvilla?' That was a scary thing to us, being newcomers, seeing how much she did."

I talked with Joyce, Judy, and Chris on a snowy February day in 2005. As I transcribed this conversation and thought about it later, I came to think of them as the dream team of health care advocates. Their competence, concern, and sensitivity were nothing short of amazing. I asked the three women to comment on what this experience had been like. Joyce was the first to respond: "My feeling is that I was just supposed to be there. It really didn't have much to do with me. I never felt like I was taking care of Arvilla. It felt like family."

Later in the conversation, Chris addressed this question: "I feel like she took care of all of us because she let us take care of her. It's so much easier for people to give than to receive, and she was such a teacher of receiving. Joyce used to say, 'She chose us. We didn't choose her.' She didn't have any compunction really about asking for what she needed, and that just made it so easy to give." Chris went on to give an example: "Once when Joyce was driving Arvilla to

chemo, she and I were sitting in the back seat because the front seat was hard for her. And she lay in the back, and somehow she ended up in my arms. She knew how to get what she needed from who she needed to get it from.”

Judy confirmed what Chris was saying: “Most people, especially women, are always giving. We wear a thousand hats and we’re giving all the time. And oftentimes it’s hard for us to step back and receive. Arvilla picked it up like that. From the beginning, Arvilla set up her mind to receive.”

“The Colonel liked to take charge.”

As I interviewed people for this story, I often asked: “If you had to describe what Arvilla was like to somebody who had never met her, what would you say?” Invariably, there would be a long pause as they struggled to find the words for this unique woman. Here are some of their answers:

Anna Hathaway: Well, the colonel liked to take charge and could do a good job, but without being annoying the way some people can be. Just a very capable woman. Everybody thought that, and they’d just leave things in her hands. Her strong voice helped. It made a difference when she first went into the army. They had different ones practice barking out commands. From early on, that voice was an asset.

Bob Persing: She had this fine line between friendship and duty. You didn’t go over too much on either side of it. You were never quite sure, when you were talking to Arv, where you were. She could be reading the orders to you as a Lieutenant Colonel, or it could be your friend Arvilla that was talking to you. Whether it was church or town hall or wherever.

Nancy Sykes: I think that Arvilla would often give the appearance of a tough exterior but even then there was a softness that came through. Oh, that’s not the right word. I think there was a need in Arvilla that came through even when she was tough.

Stacey Magdycz: Arvilla was like a safety net for the town. She made you feel that everything was going to work out.

Joyce Freeland, Chris Stockman, and Judy Feeley

Joyce: She was real. She was absolutely real.

Chris: Remember the way she managed people at the nursing home? She'd make everybody laugh. She'd go in, and the nurses at the hospital would just love her because she would kid them all the time and kid about herself. She never complained.

Judy: She was one of the most genuine people, and again the honesty was just so clear; you could be with her and be yourself.

Joyce: I never heard her say a word of gossip. A lot of people knew that she knew things, but they didn't have to worry about it.

Judy: She really cared. She cared about this town. She cared about everybody.

Shortly after conducting these interviews, I received a packet of materials from Arvilla's niece Nancy Allen, who lives in Florida. Among the clippings, there was a newspaper interview that had appeared in *Hampshire Life* on July 30, 1999. I was struck by the abrupt, no-nonsense answers Arvilla had given to the reporter's questions (see page 43 for the transcript of this interview). One response seemed especially significant. When the interviewer asked her to explain "one thing you would change about yourself," she answered, "That's for me to know and others to guess."

"It was a transformation."

As I continued to talk to people who had been involved in the town project, another important question began to emerge. What was it about Arvilla Dyer that inspired this outpouring of love and support? Nancy Sykes said that she too had been thinking about this question and trying hard to figure out the answer: "Because here are all the things Arvilla wasn't: She was not touchy feely. She was not fuzzy and warm. She was not, 'Let me share with you how I'm feeling about this.' She was none of those things. But I think people wanted to reach out to Arvilla because somewhere in that hard, almost military exterior, there was this little girl. There was this little person that you just knew needed something. She had given so much to people. She was always the giver. But something else was able to shine through. There was some kind of little—little Arvilla."

Peg Connell put it this way: "She was two different people. She was the formal Arvilla. You know, people expect certain things of you, especially when you get to be older. There are certain things that you are known for, certain things that are expected. And she just lived that to a tee. And this last year, really, as much as it took her life, allowed her to be that other person for a while, which was nice." I agreed that the last year had been a real gift to Arvilla and to the community. "Oh, it was a gift to *us*," Peg said. "Far more a gift to us, I think."

In response to my question about what it was in Arvilla that inspired so much care and devotion, Peg was quick to answer: "I think it was the change in Arvilla. I mean people can offer to help or offer to hug. But if you don't accept it, there's not much farther you can go. Especially with someone who's been so independent all her life. It was Arvilla who made that change and who opened herself to all of the suggestions and all of the help and the sleeping over and the hugs and the constant visiting and all of that. She made that work."

June Persing echoed the idea that the town was witnessing a huge change in Arvilla: "I think that it was an evolution in a lot of ways. It was absolutely amazing because she had been so private and so much unto herself. And then more and more up to the end, she became so open and accepting that it was a transformation."

"I hear you are my pajama partner for the party tonight."

Not only had none of the townspeople been inside Arvilla's house since her mother died in 1976, but nothing in the house had been changed or moved. So it was something of a shock when people began coming in to take care of all the daily necessities. Peg Connell explained: "I think the hardest adjustment initially, at least from what she told me, was the fact that so many people came and thought there was a better place for something. And she had to have that table in her living room because it had all her medical stuff on it. And she laid everything out, or she had stacks of things. She finally made the table work for her. But that was a tough adjustment until she got into the routine—Thelma Pilgrim came and changed the sheets and cleaned the bedrooms, and Donna Hudson came and took her laundry and did it, and people came in and cleaned the kitchen."

Before Arvilla got sick, Judy Williams used to visit her about once a week at the Town Hall; the purpose of these visits was for Arvilla to pass along important historical information about the town to Judy, Arv's successor as President of the Historical Society. Twelve-year-old Sarah Boudreau, who was living with Judy and Dudley Williams at the time, used to go along on these visits, and she grew very fond of the older woman. When Arvilla became ill, the visits continued—but at the house instead of the Town Hall. Sarah knew how much Arvilla missed her dog, so she decided to give Arvilla two of her own stuffed dogs. Arvilla put the big dog looking out the front window.



EMTs Sue Forgea and Stacey Magdycz

Besides getting used to having other people in the house moving things around, Arvilla also had to face another major adjustment at this time, which related to nutrition. Sadly, Arvilla, who had always loved to eat, could only swallow a few bites of food at a time. After she started chemo, the situation got even worse, until she really couldn't eat at all. Ann Kohn, a friend and Plainfield resident, mixed

up a batch of her special boiled eggnog and delivered it to the house. For several days, this was the only nutrition Arvilla got. And she continued to enjoy the eggnog that Ann prepared throughout her illness.

Because Arvilla wasn't able to eat much solid food, the doctors prescribed nightly infusions of TPN (Total Parenteral Nutrition), a carefully balanced mix of nutrients that is delivered intravenously. A visiting nurse would stop at the house every evening and hook up the portable pump; by morning all of the solution would have been absorbed. At this time, June Persing and the other care coordinators decided it was important to have someone stay overnight at the house on a regular basis to supervise the TPN and make sure that Arvilla was all right.

It wasn't long before Arvilla, who had lived alone for many years, began to look forward to these sleepovers. Later, at the funeral, Sue Forgea, the Town Clerk of Cummington, explained: "My first stayover in Plainfield began with a call from Arvilla saying, 'I hear you are my pajama partner for the party tonight.' I was terrified to stay with the female 'god' of Plainfield. We went to bed at 1:00 a.m. She told stories of her family, and I was in awe. Stories like her father saying during the Depression that they were rich because they had veggies and fresh fruit growing out back. Stories about her and friends making raw onion sandwiches and then sneaking out back to a place like a tree hut to hide."

Stacey Magdycz, who had known and respected Arvilla when she was a young girl growing up in Plainfield, also became a frequent overnight guest. In talking about these sleepovers, she explained, "What struck me when I went into Arvilla's house, was the dead silence. We're so used to all of today's influences of TV, radio, all that stimulation. I can't remember the last time when there was no background noise. I'd bring books and read, but usually we'd end up talking. But when she'd doze off, all you would hear would be the furnace coming on. It made me realize how much outside stimulation we're getting most of the time. She made it comfortable for us, but you knew it was her space."

Peg Connell also has fond memories of pajama parties at the Dyer homestead. She didn't stay overnight as often as many other women. But once every week or two, she would come over to the

house with her bedroll and take it up to the big brass bed on the second floor. Then she would come back down, and she and Arv would talk and talk: "I would *love* to hear her talk about her family, especially when she was young and she would take those horse-drawn rides into Amherst for high school and stay the week there and hope that she could get back. But a lot of times in the winter, she didn't get back. She talked about her mother being the librarian. Her mother was very much a taskmaster, I guess, not too far from what she was like before she got sick. Her memories were so vivid, and she remembered so much. She would talk a little bit about her service years, but not very much. She loved the time when she was out in Hawaii. But other than that, she didn't really get into too much detail about that part of her life, with me anyway. We would sit and talk until one o'clock in the morning. And then she'd say, 'You know what? We've got to get up tomorrow, so we'd better go to bed.'" Then Peg would go behind her up the steep stairs to the bedrooms on the second floor.

In March, Arvilla developed an infection and had to be hospitalized at the Berkshire Medical Center in Pittsfield. Peg explained, "Arvilla didn't want to bother anybody, and Joyce was away in Florida. But it was pretty bad. I didn't want to leave her in the morning, so I kind of lingered a little bit longer, and then I said to her, 'I'll come back in an hour or call and see if you need anything.' That morning I was back and forth pretty frequently. I called June Persing and said, 'There's really something not right.'" Finally, Arvilla got in touch with Chris Stockman, who told her to get to the Berkshire Medical Center as soon as possible. Peg remembers getting a phone call from Arvilla, who was speaking abruptly: "Peg. Arvilla. I need my clothes. Can you come and get my clothes?" Peg came right over and helped her to get ready for the drive to the hospital. According to Peg, she said, "I need my plaid wool pants, and I need my blazer." Peg continued, "So you have to get the uniform out and get her all dressed and get her coat and get her hat and just about that time when I had everything put together for her, Judy and June came, plopped her in the car, and off they went. That really was the last time she was there at the house, other than coming back for Memorial Day or a day to sit on her porch, which she did a few times."

In the hospital, Arvilla requested a single room and had an extra bed put in. Prominently posted on the whiteboard at the foot of her bed was the name of her overnight care person, and many people drove to Pittsfield even in snow and bad weather to spend the night with Arvilla. During the month of March while she was in the hospital, someone stayed with her every single night. These overnight caregivers included Judy Feeley, Joyce Freeland, Chris Stockman, June Persing, Stacey Magdycz, Sue Forgea, Susi Westwood, Sue Mellstrom, Peg Connell, and Wendy Mimitz.

Once she was well enough, Arvilla moved to the Williamstown Commons Nursing Home. She decided to spend some of her savings so that she could have a single room. She explained that she had been saving for years for her old age, and then added, "If this isn't it, I don't know what is." One reason she wanted to have a single room, I suspect, was so that she could continue to welcome her overnight guests. Unfortunately, this proved to be against the policy of the nursing home, so her many visitors had to come during the day.

"I need a hug."

Although Arvilla had always been outgoing and friendly, there was a certain Yankee reserve about her that seemed to say, "Don't get too close." Peg Connell remembers that this reserve began to break down on the day she stood up in church and announced that she had cancer: "That was the day that I remember her saying, 'I need a hug.' That was not something that Arvilla generally would have done. But that was when she really opened herself up to getting hugs." Soon she was getting lots of hugs, and she joked: "I've never had this many hugs—especially from men—in my whole life." Along with the hugs came shared confidences. She soon learned how many other people in town had faced cancer and overcome it.

Eventually, Arvilla came to expect a hug from everyone who visited her in the hospital or nursing home. Anna Hathaway told of a time when two Cub Scout leaders brought their troop to visit Arvilla. As the visit drew to a close, Arvilla announced, "It's hug time!" The two adult leaders had no trouble complying, but the boys were shy and embarrassed and shrank into the background. According to Anna, Arvilla was very amused by this reaction to her request for hugs.

"How many people do you know whose town takes care of them?"

Arvilla soon settled into her room at the nursing home. Surprisingly, she didn't want anything brought over from the house in Plainfield. She seemed to be creating a new life for herself in this new place. Peg Connell explained:

She felt very comfortable there. She had developed a great network of support. She had a minimal amount of things she had to deal with there. She had her book that you'd better sign in on and she would keep her notes on. And she had her stack of cards and correspondence. And things laid out. She still worked the same way. Things down in piles. But it was minimal. And over in her house there were just stacks everywhere. She seemed to be feeling, "Here's my chance to have a fresh, clean start. And that's what I'm going to do." It's not that she forgot the things she had at home or didn't appreciate having them before. She just didn't feel the need to have them any more. She had developed a family besides her biological family.

It was in the nursing home that Arvilla began to wear her signature hat—a red baseball cap with "Plainfield" emblazoned on the front in white letters. Hendrik Messenger had brought her this hat, and she adopted it immediately, only taking it off at night. Earlier she had rejected the turbans that female chemo patients sometimes wear to cover their thinning hair. Two people had given her turbans, but according to Anna Hathaway, "She spurned the turban. She held it out at arm's length, and said, 'Take it away, Anna! Put it in the Goodwill.'"

Between her hospitalization on March 5, 2004, and her death on September 23, Arvilla had more than 800 visitors. We know this because Arvilla, always a record keeper, noted everything in a little notebook that June Persing had given her. On April 16, Arvilla received a scrapbook for all the cards she had gotten, but she noted in parentheses next to this entry "not big enough." Invariably, when visitors arrived, she would be wearing her Plainfield hat, and she often asked, with pride in her voice, "How many people do you know in the world whose town takes care of them?"

"She was interested in life."

According to June Persing, Arvilla "was really so well loved" in the nursing home. People on the staff "enjoyed her because she had a keen sense of humor and she was so quick. They couldn't say anything that she didn't have an immediate retort. And they just loved it." Bob Persing talked about how the staff members from the nursing home would stop by to visit with Arvilla after they got off their shifts, even though they were tired and needed to get home to their families.

In commenting on how Arvilla adjusted to the nursing home, Anna Hathaway said: "She was interested in life. Sounds odd, but no TV, no radio, some books, but she always said, 'There's all that life out in the hallway, coming and going and everything.' And that was her entertainment instead of radio or TV."

Stacey Magdycz recalled that Arvilla showed this same kind of interest in the neighborhood children when Stacey was growing up in town: "Even though you were a kid, she talked to you. She wasn't yelling at you for crossing through her yard with a bike or anything like that. I just remember being intrigued, and then when I was little bit older, someone told me that she was a Lieutenant Colonel. And I was a tomboy anyway, so I thought, 'That's really cool.'" Not only did Arvilla know all of the neighborhood children by name; she knew the dogs as well. Each day, when she walked her dog up to the cemetery and back, she addressed every dog by name.

Perhaps it was this same sense of involvement and authenticity that Nancy Sykes had in mind when she said, "I think one of the reasons why the town was so anxious to help Arvilla is because she was so genuinely real. There was no pretense about her. And therefore you didn't have to pretend. I think that she was just incredibly real. Which is so rare to find in any of us. To have that kind of relationship with the world so that you do not have to pretend. But why does that make us want to come to someone's assistance? I don't think we wanted to lose Arvilla. I think everybody wanted to hold on to her."

***“Leadership’s not talking about it.
It’s action. Arvilla was action.”***

The town project of caring for Arvilla was, in some ways, a woman’s initiative. This is not surprising since nursing and caregiving are often assumed to be female roles. At least one man volunteered to be an overnight caregiver when Arvilla was still living at home, but she replied with a grin, “I don’t think Plainfield is ready for *that!*”

Although Arvilla spent more time with women in her last year, she had always worked well with men and had gained an unusual amount of respect from them not only during her



*Lt. Col. (Ret.) Arvilla Dyer presides over the
Memorial Day service at Plainfield Cemetery.*

days in the military but also in her retirement years as Commander of the American Legion and as an EMT and first responder. She often said to her friend Anna Hathaway, “It’s a man’s world.” Long ago, Arvilla had learned how to be a part of this world.

I asked Bernie Forgea of Cummington, who had known Arvilla for years as a member of the American Legion and a fellow EMT, to talk about how Arvilla functioned in these groups:

I can tell you that when she first took the EMT course, she went with two men from Cummington, and the three of them rode for months over to Northampton to school

together during terrible weather. She drove. She always had to be in control. That was the Lieutenant Colonel part of her.

When she finished the course she started to work on the ambulance. And being military, she understood mission, which is so difficult. If you don't understand mission, it's very hard to focus a group of people to do something. But she understood from her background in the military that there were things that had to be done, and rank had to get out of the way, and personal egos, and all of that. The thing about giving orders is you've got to know how to take them. And she understood that.

She brought the calm and focus to an accident scene that we really look for. It was a very professional, mature, focused presence. And it helped everybody calm down, realize what you're there for, go to the basics, and if you needed somebody in charge, she could rise to that occasion too.

She went through that entire process, became an EMT, and served very, very faithfully and then had to stop because she had to take care of her father. But when he passed away, she went back and took the course *over*. I wouldn't take it over if all I had to do was walk across the street, and they'd give me a new certificate. But absolutely, she understood the need. She was focused, and she said, "I know you need me. And as long as I can do it—until I retire. . . ." And we said, "Well, that is never, right?" And she'd say, "Well, there's going to come a day."

I encouraged Bernie to say more about how Arvilla functioned in a man's world, about how the men in these volunteer organizations felt about taking orders from her:

We all respected Arvilla not only for her time and grade in the military and everything she had done, but when you looked at her dedication. She retired to come home and take care of her family. And when you knew the background

and history of that and the fact that her work ethic and her participation ethic were so strong.

We used to joke around with her and ask her, "Why didn't you ever get married, Arvilla?" And she'd say, "I'm not gonna wash any man's socks!" She used to catch so much guff from the ranks [of the American Legion] during Memorial Day parades. The guys would be marching behind her. "Arvilla, speed it up! Slow it down! How much longer have we gotta go?" But she could handle it. The guys loved her. She'd say, "Keep still back there. You know better." You had to be there to listen to it. It was hilarious.

But I'll tell you, when she held a meeting of the American Legion, there might be two or three there—or a hundred. It was absolutely, ceremoniously, correctly done. Everything came out the way it was supposed to be, and you did what you had to do. And when business was over, it was over. But, boy, I'll tell you, it was business. She's not afraid to work. She absolutely put the younger generation to shame. *Qu*

Eventually, Arvilla retired as an EMT. But she never returned her pager; she kept it turned on even during her illness. She liked to listen to the calls and wanted to know what was going on.

I interviewed Bernie along with his wife, Sue, and Stacey Magdycz on a Friday evening in the early spring. All three had served with Arvilla as EMTs. Sue is the Town Clerk of Cummington, and she and Stacey were very involved in caring for Arvilla throughout her illness.

Sue and Stacey were frequently mentioned in the notebook Arvilla kept while she was in the hospital and the nursing home. A note written on April 13, 2004, read: "Have an appointment for Chemo next Tuesday at 8:30 a.m.!! Sue and Stacey have volunteered to take me. Such friends!" The two women visited often and sometimes drove Arvilla to medical appointments in the ambulance, which was more comfortable than going by car.

Toward the end of our conversation, we talked about why Arvilla had meant so much to each of us:

Stacey: She had that intellectual way of thinking before she opened her mouth and said the wrong thing. She knew how to read people and she knew how to work the way she needed to work to achieve what she wanted to achieve.

Bernie: That's right. She went through the military in a man's world, which it was at that time. And she knew how to manipulate them and work them around to where they had to be to get the job done. And she carried that over out here [in the Hilltowns], which was great. It helped us a great deal.

Stacey: She had wisdom. I guess that would be a word I'd use.

Bernie: She did. I cannot imagine what it would be like for a woman in service at that time. She had spirit. She had an internal fire burning for life. If you've got to pick a role model, there's some role model—man or woman, I don't care.

Stacey: I know Dennis Thatcher [the Chief of Plainfield's Volunteer Firefighters Association] said that when he was younger and she was an EMT, that he considered her as his mentor. That's who he looked up to.

Rebecca: For you as women, EMTs, was she an important role model for you?

Sue: She was my mentor as Town Clerk, I know that.

Stacey: She did all the things as a woman in her time that only men were supposed to be able to do. And since I was a tomboy growing up, that was important to me. I used to go down to the Town Clerk's Office to buy my hunting license, and she was the first other woman that I talked to about hunting. She would ask me about it and be interested in what I had to say. And later, if I saw her walking the dog, she'd ask me if I got anything. It was never a discouraging word like "You shouldn't be doing that."

Rebecca: Maybe she just didn't have any of these gender stereotypes that most of us have. She was beyond that somehow.

Sue: I got closer to her through the stories she told when I stayed overnight with her. She talked a lot about the Depression, and, of course, that's when my folks were around. I'd get lots of stories from her and I loved to listen. That's when I started going home and writing things down. I just was in awe of some of the stuff she'd been through.

Rebecca: From talking to people, I get the feeling that in the last year of her life, Arvilla spent a lot more time just talking and telling stories. Did you all feel that there was a change in her in the last year?

Stacey: Definitely. I think she let us get to know her more personally.

Sue: Not that she didn't like people, I don't mean that. But she really got to know that she *loved* people and that people could love her. It was okay for people to love her. She didn't have to put up a front anymore.

Bernie: Her life was structured differently than ours. She lived in a different world at a different time. Every now and then a glimpse of the other side of her would slip through, but it didn't really come until you guys [Sue and Stacey] went with her at the end there. And if



Arvilla Dyer with Bernie and Dennis Forgea

you think about it, it makes sense. If you take someone and you put them in a pattern for twenty or thirty years, you're bound to have a product that reflects the environment.

Stacey: I always thought that she felt if she showed the other side, she'd be showing a weakness. Maybe being in the military and being a woman in that rank, she couldn't take a chance because they might think of that as a moment of weakness. But, at the end, she learned that people would still respect her.

Bernie: She was a leader. And Stacey used the one word I agree with that really sums her up, "wisdom." She earned the respect of others through her life and career, and she applied it well. She didn't apply it overbearingly. She had a sense of humor, and it was dry, but boy, she was really funny! She would hammer out something terrible, and the guys loved it. She could give it, but she could also take it. It went back and forth. When you stop and think about how she was brought up and the military experience, it was a man's world. And here's Arvilla, plowing along through there, doing well. She was a woman before her time.

The sign of leadership is someone who has those internal strengths and expresses them externally to the rest of us and gives the aura that she's in command and control of herself and the environment. That's what leadership is all about. Leadership's not talking about it. It's action. And Arvilla was action. Arvilla wasn't a leader because she had position. She was a leader because she did what she said she was going to do. And many times she told *you* what to do.

Rebecca: And you did it.

Bernie: Oh yes, we did it!

"Memorial Day was a triumph for her."

For many years, Memorial Day and Arvilla Dyer have been synonymous for people in the Hilltowns of Western Massachusetts. Since retiring from the Army and returning to live in Plainfield in 1972, she had been instrumental in organizing the Memorial Day observances, which usually included a dinner at the town hall (featuring ham, baked beans, and homemade pies) sponsored by the Grange followed by a parade from the church, down to the four corners by the post office, and then proceeding on Central Street to the cemetery. Besides chair-

ing the Grange committee to organize the dinner, Arvilla also marched in several other parades in the Hilltowns as Commander of American Legion Post 304. Most townspeople will never forget Commander Dyer's authoritative voice ringing out as she led the ceremony at the monument in Hilltop Cemetery honoring the Civil War dead: "Uncover. Sound taps. Salute the dead." Then, after leading her troops back to the center of town, she conducted the closing ceremonies in front of the Plainfield Congregational Church.

Memorial Day 2004 was an amazing day for Arvilla and for the town. She rode in the parade seated on the back of Ruth and Paul Fuhrmann's convertible and took an active part in conducting the ceremony. I knew that Peg Connell had been instrumental in organizing this effort, and so I asked her how it all got started. Here's how Peg told the story:

One day last spring I was sitting and chatting with Arvilla in the nursing home, and she said, "You know there's something I'd love to do." And I said, "Well, you name it, and I'll make it happen." And she said, "I'd love to ride in the Memorial Day parade." And I said, "Okay. Is this going to be a secret, or are we going to publicize this?" "No. Let's not say anything yet." So I said, "Okay." And she said, "Can you get your buddy's car?" Ruthie's [Ruth and Paul Fuhrmann's] convertible. She knew exactly what she wanted to do. And I said I'm sure I can get Ruthie's car. So she said, "All right. That's really what I want to do." And I said, "All right. Can I spring you from this place?" Because I didn't know what the rules were or whether I needed Joyce's permission or whatever. She goes, "Oh yeah. Oh yeah." So I said, "All right. Anyplace else you'd like to go?" She said, "No. I'd just like to do that."

So as time went on, she'd have her good days and her bad days. But every time I'd go over, I would say, "Okay. Plan's set. I'll call you the day before, and you tell me if you're up to it, and I'll come and get you." She said, "Well, I need a few things." And I said, "Do you want to go to the house in the morning and change?" "Yes," she said. "All

right. I will come and get you early. We'll go in the house. And hopefully nobody will know you're there, not too many people anyway. And you can sit and rest."

I had gotten some things that I knew she liked to just kind of munch on like fresh raspberries and some grapes. And she loved cheese, so I had some slices of sharp cheese and some crackers. And quite a few bottles of water and some juice because trying to keep her hydrated was tough. She didn't eat much that day. I think she was too excited. It was exhausting for me, and I can only imagine how tired she was.

But I went and got her. I had laid out her uniform and everything that she needed and made sure she had warm enough things underneath. Fortunately, it was a nice day. So she was warm enough. Her hands were actually very warm. Mine were cold that day. I don't know why. I'd say to her, "Here, hold my hand a little bit."

But once she had that uniform on, she was chomping at the bit to get in that car and do that parade. And of course everybody at that point was out on the lawn, and she came out of the door, and there were cheers and clapping. So then she got into the car, and she did all her waving and had a big smile. You can see the smile in the pictures. And Paul [Fuhrmann] drove, and I climbed in and sat and just kind of held on to her. She just loved it! She sat up on the back the whole way around to the cemetery. And then we went into the cemetery, and I had gotten flowers for her to put on her parents' grave. And she says, "I can't get out and do that and get back in." So we stopped, and she pointed it out, and I ran over and put the flowers on and hopped back in the car.

Then we went around again and Paul was there, and we took out the wheelchair. Getting in and out of that car was tough for her. We got her in the wheelchair, and we found kind of a path, and Paul wheeled her over. Everybody, of course, was saying, "Hi, Arvilla!" and coming over and talking. And she was like royalty! She was just in her

glory! And then we went back to the car.

We were getting ready for the second service down in front of the church. And we had gotten over to the car, and Jerry [Connell] was there taking pictures. I said, "Jerry, pick her up and put her on the back because she can't climb through there again. It's exhausting for her." And he goes, "Okay." I said, "Arvilla, Jerry's just gonna lift you over into the car." She said, "He can't do that!" I said, "Trust me. He can do that." He just picked her up and plopped her down, and she turns and says to him, "Well, I didn't know you were that strong. And where were you this morning?"

Then we went back down and got her back in the wheelchair in front of the church. Of course, she's directing everybody. Here are all these men in uniform with flags and all these official things. And she's saying, "Go over here." She had done it so many times, and it had to be the way she wanted it done.

It was a glorious day—Memorial Day. And then at the end, she was getting tired, and she said, "I need to go back and sit." So we went back into the house. She kind of said goodbye. Of course, everybody wanted to talk to her, and by the end of the day she was getting very tired. She went back in the house, and Ruthie came in, and we got the things she needed and put her clothes away and did those sorts of things. And she said, "I'm ready to go. I want to go home." It wasn't the first time that I'd heard her say that [referring to the nursing home]. But she did refer to the place in Williamstown as home. She felt very comfortable there. She had developed a great network of support there.

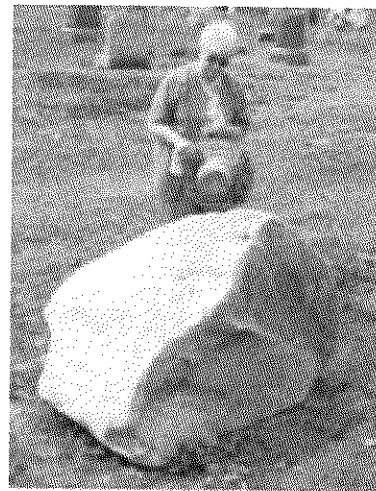
Like everyone else who attended the Memorial Day Parade on May 31, 2004, Anna Hathaway remembers Arvilla sitting like a queen on the back of the convertible and greeting everyone along the parade route: "She got more respect than the flag. Peg took a great picture of her in her car, with a great grin, and developed it so that she could take it back to the nursing home with her. And she said Arvilla kept looking at the picture, feeling pleased."

"She's not Mrs. Dyer or Ms. Dyer. She's Colonel Dyer."

After Memorial Day, about six months since the cancer had been diagnosed, Arvilla's condition began to worsen. The day after the big parade, Arvilla spiked a fever of 104 and had to be hospitalized at the Berkshire Medical Center for seven days. Once her condition had stabilized, she returned to the nursing home in Williamstown, where a steady stream of visits from old and new friends continued to be a source of comfort and support. Pastor Nancy Sykes drove over to Williamstown every Sunday after conducting the church service in Plainfield to talk and pray with Arvilla. Bob Corash, Arvilla's lawyer, visited often to consult about financial matters. Esther Williams, an old friend from the Eastern Star, visited regularly, often bringing little things to make Arvilla more comfortable.

Anna Hathaway came almost every day; she tidied up the room, watered the plants, and cared for the flower arrangements that people were always bringing. Anna explained that, although she and Arvilla had grown up in the same small town, they weren't close friends until Arvilla retired from the Army in 1972: "Arvilla was my sister's age, six years older. Six years was a big gap then." Their friendship deepened in the past five years when Arv's older sister, Priscilla, developed dementia and required more care during her summer visits to Plainfield. Anna explained, "We started getting together on Sunday and going to my sister's house in Northampton to play cards. Priscilla could sit at the card table and join in the conversation. And Arvilla likes her cards. Of course, my sister [Barbara Rice Snape] was a longtime friend, but I was almost a junior partner. Eventually, we invited Margaret Pease [who like Anna and Arvilla had grown up in Plainfield], and now she's part of the card group."

During Arvilla's illness, the group continued to meet for lunch and then go over to the nursing home. One Sunday in August while my husband,



Anna Hathaway looks at Arvilla's tombstone.

Frank, and I were visiting Arvilla, Anna, Margaret, and Blanche Cizek, another longtime friend, arrived. As the women joked and chatted, it was easy to forget that one of them was very ill. Soon the talk turned to tombstones. It seems that many years earlier Arvilla had decided on using a rough piece of fieldstone to mark her grave. According to Anna, this decision was sparked by her husband, Dutch Hathaway's, tombstone, which came from their backyard:

It got her started thinking, and she said one day she wanted native stone, and she had spotted a good one up on the stone wall on this piece of property over on West Street. She knew the owner, but she didn't have an address to write to him and ask if she could buy this stone. She said, "Too bad I can't just topple it down into the stream bed and then pick it up." Well, it went on for years. It dragged on until this last year, when the stone fell down on the wrong side of the wall.

In May of 2004, Arvilla decided it was time to take action. She got permission from the owner, and Dick Higgins and Ed Romer were going to move the stone. They asked the Town Clerk, Theresa Thatcher, where to put it, and eventually they decided to move it to the cemetery. Always a stickler for detail, Arvilla asked her friends to take a picture of the stone once it had been moved. She took one look at the photo and said, "No, that's not the way!" She couldn't rest easy until someone had come over with a bucket loader and turned the stone around so it was exactly the way she wanted it.

That day in August, Margaret Pease produced a photo to prove that the error had been corrected, and Anna gave Arvilla a cartoon she had cut out of a magazine showing a stone that was shaped a good deal like her rock. The caption read, "At least I'm not as old as this stone." The friends shared a good laugh, and then Anna pinned the picture up on the bulletin board.

During her weekday visits, Anna often went to physical therapy sessions with Arv. Besides relieving the boredom, these sessions gave Arvilla a chance to share her own history as an occupational therapist (OT) with the other professionals. Anna recalls one session in

particular. After the second time the therapist addressed Arv as "Mrs. Dyer," Anna set her straight: "It's *not* Mrs. Dyer." And she said, "Oh, Ms. Dyer?" "No. *Colonel* Dyer." The little old woman in the wheelchair next to her said, "Oh! Retired?" And Arvilla said "yes." That was the first time in the therapy session that Arvilla had spoken. Later, back in her own room, she told Anna that she was quite proud of her rank: "I earned that. I worked for that."

Most people who spent time with Arvilla during her illness said that she didn't talk much about her Army days and her job as an

occupational therapist at various hospitals during the Korean and Vietnam wars. She worked with amputees and others suffering from physical problems as well as their dependents. On September 5, Glenna Gentry, an OT who had served with Arvilla and had stayed in touch with her over the years, came to Plainfield for a visit. When she learned that Arvilla was very ill, she decided to drive



Lt. Col. Arvilla Dyer receives her Certificate of Retirement, November 19, 1971.

over to the nursing home to see her. Her visit ended up lasting for two days and two nights. During this time they reminisced about their time spent together in the military. After her friend left, Arvilla said, "Glenna will see that the rest of our group knows about me."

Sure enough, on September 7, Eunice Howard, another of Arvilla's friends from the military, telephoned. The two old friends talked for a long time, laughing and sharing. Afterward, Arvilla said she was glad she had gotten all the latest facts about the other members of the OT team, and she was also glad that she had been able to tell Eunice about what was going on with her.

After these contacts with her Army buddies, Arvilla began to reminisce more about her days in the military. On occasion, she even answered the phone in the nursing home in her official Army voice: "Occupational Therapy. Colonel Dyer here."

Later, after Arvilla's death, both Eunice and Glenna spoke with Joyce about Arvilla's role in their lives. According to Eunice, "Many of the OTs were much younger than Arvilla. They were really interested in guys—just young women focused on having fun. But Arvilla kept us on task. We all loved her."

Glenna recalled, "She had such a hearty laugh, and she just got along with everybody. She always had that big, wide smile. It sort of covered her whole face. She was a very impressive part of our life and a really good friend." She also shared with Joyce a poem entitled "Arvie," which she had written during her two-day visit to the nursing home in September 2004:



Captain Dyer, Occupational Therapist, with patient Cesario Acosta at Walter Reed Hospital, June 17, 1960

I remember most
your bold energy,
your subtle humor,
your wide and ready smile.
I recall too, your totally
untarnished
outlook toward life,
your service to others
in work and community.
Thank you for glorious
footprints
in my memories
and for the sun rays
of your being.
May you go smoothly
on soft airy steps,
a warm breeze at your back.
I can see your eager
outstretched hand
and broad smile
as you meet your God
and hear Him say,
“Well done, my good
and faithful servant.”

“She didn’t have to say anything, it was just the smile.”

Finally, in September of 2004, Arvilla had to face the reality she had been trying so hard to deny for nearly a year.

When I asked Pastor Nancy Sykes if she could describe one visit with Arvilla that stood out in her memory, she quickly replied, “Yes. But I think I shared that at the funeral. The time that really stands out wasn’t the last time, but it was close to the last. It was the time that she said, ‘Nancy, I’m not going to beat this.’ That was a huge thing for her to say. Believe me, I would have said it a long time before. That’s when I said, ‘But you have beaten it.’ And then I asked her, ‘Do you have any regrets?’ This was a really brazen thing for me to say. She was dying. And I’m saying, ‘Do you regret that this is

what you had to have to live?’ And she said ‘No.’ And that, to me, was like a gift. I got a gift. She did not hesitate. ‘No. I have no regrets.’ I don’t know how many of us will ever be able to say that.”

I reminded Nancy that, at the funeral, she had said that Arvilla lived more in her last year than in all her previous years, and she was quick to reply:

And she knew that. That’s the thing. She *knew* that. One of the times I went to visit her in the nursing home, I said, “Arvilla, do you have any advice for me?” And of course, she gave me some very practical advice: “Don’t forget to say hello to all the new people at the end of church.” And then she said: “I want to thank you for teaching me about love. I never knew that you could say, ‘I love you’ to people.” The town loved her and let her know it, those people that came in there all the time. And she was able to say “I love you” and “Let me give you a hug.” She got a taste of being loved. And it was irresistible as it is for any of us. A taste of being really taken in and held.

When I asked June and Bob Persing to describe a specific thing that they remembered, June said: “Sometimes, especially toward the end, you weren’t sure if she was sleeping or just resting, or what was happening. But after a while she might open her eyes and look at you with the most beautiful smile. I’d never seen this smile on her until the last few months. It was just the softest, it was like she was taking such pleasure in your just being there. And she didn’t have to say anything, it was just the smile.” Then June looked over at Bob and said, “You know what I’m talking about.” And he said, “Oh, yeah.”

When I mentioned this smile to Joyce, Judy, and Chris, they knew exactly what I meant. Judy explained: “I began to recognize that this was Arvilla’s way of loving, her way of sending some love through her eyes. And boy could she do it! I could tell after it happened a couple of times that she was really in a good place.”

Sue Forgea and Stacey Magdycz explained that toward the end Arvilla slept a lot, but, according to Sue, “She said ‘Thank you’ for every little thing you did for her. We told her we loved her all the

time.” Stacey added, “I think that’s really when she started to say it back. I think it was the last time I talked to her before she couldn’t talk any more, and when I was leaving, she just had a big smile and said, ‘I love you so much. Make sure you come back.’ And she gave me a kiss. And for her that was huge.”

Up until the end, Arvilla remained lucid and responsive to those around her. On September 9, Hospice was called in. On September 14, her nieces, Nancy and Marcia Allen, came up from their home in Dunedin, Florida, to be with her. On September 22, Judy Feeley, sensing that the end was near, decided to stay the night. The next morning, around 7 o’clock, Arvilla died peacefully.

Arvilla’s Monument.

Arvilla had often told Nancy Sykes that it was a dream of hers to see the Plainfield Congregational Church packed to capacity. Ironically, this dream came true on the day of her funeral, October 3, 2004. It was a glorious fall day, and the church looked splendid. Chinese urns full of red, white, and blue flowers, lovingly grown and arranged by Peg Connell, were placed on either side of the altar. Numerous groups in uniform attended, representing the Plainfield Police and Fire Departments, the EMTs, the Grange, and the American Legion. Arvilla had selected the pallbearers shortly before her death: Bob Corash, Sue Forgea, Stacey Magdycz, Ed Morann, Bob Persing, and Dennis Thatcher. The choir, which she had been a part of for so many years, sang to honor her memory. Nancy Sykes delivered a beautiful reflection on the meaning of Arvilla’s life, especially her amazing final year. Friends and her niece Nancy shared their remembrances. At the conclusion of the service, Joyce Freeland, Judy Feeley, and Chris Stockman tolled the church bell 81 times—for each year of Arvilla’s life. After a military service at the graveside, a catered lunch—arranged and paid for by Arvilla herself—was served at the Town Hall.

Speaking nearly four months later, Judy Williams said, “So many of us love her so deeply. And it is special that we share that bond as people who were intimately involved with her. It’s what makes so many of us realize what an extraordinary place this town is. On the other hand, I guess I’d like to say that when people have a chance to

care, the best in them comes out. Because of this, the best in people came out. It was just a wonderful, wonderful experience for everybody. Who would think that death would be such an incredible experience?"

Perhaps the only one of Arvilla's dreams that did not come true was her hope to write the history of Plainfield. Near the end of her life, she spoke about this to her closest friends and relatives with a sense of frustration bordering on anger. She was shocked and disappointed that she had run out of time so unexpectedly. Anna Hathaway remembers saying to her, "Well, you were too busy living. You were doing things for other people, not for yourself."

But I can't help wondering: If she had written the history, how many people really would have read it? How much would this book have touched their lives? How much would it have changed the community? No, Arvilla never got around to updating the history of Plainfield. Instead, the great work of her life was life—to help wherever she could, to be involved, to serve her community, and to accept the love that came to her in her final year. Although there is a hefty piece of fieldstone marking her grave in the Hilltop Cemetery, the true monument to Arvilla's life is the web of love and trust and support she built among her friends and neighbors right here in Plainfield.

Obituary

Arvilla Lois Dyer

PLAINFIELD—Arvilla Lois Dyer, daughter of C. Frederick and M. Arvilla (Sampson) Dyer, died September 23. She was born in Pelham, MA, on January 21, 1923. The family moved from Amherst to Plainfield in 1924 and this has been her legal residence ever since. She graduated from Hallock Memorial School in Plainfield, and from Amherst High School in 1941. She attended Worcester State Teachers College for two years before transferring to Western Michigan College of Education in Kalamazoo, where she majored in Occupational Therapy. She received her Bachelor of Science Degree in Special Education.

Her first position, as an Occupational Therapist, was at Old Farms Convalescent Hospital training school for the blind of World War II. When it closed she worked at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Newington, CT, for several years before being transferred to the V.A. Hospital in Manchester, NH.

She joined the Army Reserve and during the Korean War went on active duty. Later she joined the regular Army and served for 20 years. She was a staff therapist at William Beaumont Army Hospital, El Paso, TX, at Tripler Army Hospital, Honolulu, HI, and at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Washington, D.C. She was the Chief of the Occupational Therapy Section at the U.S. Army Hospitals, Fort Campbell, KY, at Brooke Army Medical Center, Fort Sam Houston, TX, at Martin Army Hospital, Fort Benning, GA, and at Valley Forge General Hospital, Phoenixville, PA, from which she retired as a Lieutenant Colonel.

She was a member of many professional organizations, among them the American Occupational Therapy Association and the World Federation of Occupational Therapists. She was past president of the Connecticut Occupational Therapy Association, and past vice president of the District of Columbia Occupational Therapy Association.

A long time Grange member, she joined Plainfield Grange in 1937 and served as its Master for 20 years, and subsequently as Lady

Assistant Steward. She was a Past Master of Hillside Pomona Grange and served as a Subordinate Grange Deputy for several Masters of the Massachusetts State Grange for 17 years, and was a member of the National Grange for over 57 years. She was a Chairman of the Memorial Day observances for many years.

Her service to the Town of Plainfield included the following: Town Clerk—26 years; Burial Agent—24 years, President of Cemetery Association—26 years, during which period she was responsible for mapping most of the Town's cemeteries; Secretary-Master Street Address Guide Committee; Veterans' Graves Officer—24 years; Chairperson of Historical Commission—23 years; Chairperson of Bicentennial Committee; Member of Massachusetts Town Clerks' Association, and the Western Massachusetts City and Town Clerks' Association.

She was a member of the Plainfield Congregational Church, which she joined in 1934. She served as a Deacon since 1978 and as Chairman of the Music Committee for over 20 years. She was also Secretary and Treasurer of the Ladies Benevolent Society for 23 years. She was a member of the Highland Club and for many years sang with the Hilltown Choral Society. She was Commander of the Cumington Post #304, American Legion for 28 years and Adjutant for 18 years; and Past Matron of Joel Hayden Chapter #171, Order of the Eastern Star. She was the Editor of the *Plainfield Post* since 1972 and was a member of the What Nots.

As a First Aid Instructor, she taught classes in Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts. She was an Emergency Medical Technician with the Cumington Ambulance for 14 years and served as a First Responder for many years after that. First aid was one of her hobbies.

In 2004 she received the Clinton W. Fisk Award of the Plainfield Volunteer Firefighters Association in recognition of her outstanding contributions to the Fire Department.

Local history and genealogy were other hobbies. She and her sister, Priscilla Allen, did research preparatory to writing a History of Plainfield. She was a member of the Early Sites Research Society and of the New England Historic Genealogical Society. She was President of the Plainfield Historical Society for 30 years.

Service to the community is a family trait, as was being Town Clerk. Her grandfather, Charles N. Dyer, served as Town Clerk for over 40 years, was also Postmaster, and in 1892 wrote a History of Plainfield. Her father was Town Clerk for over 30 years; his brother Albert F. Dyer also held the office, as did her sister, Priscilla. Family members have held the office, off and on, for 102 years. Her mother was librarian of Shaw Memorial Library for 43 years.

She is survived by her sister, Priscilla Allen, nieces, Nancy and Marcia Allen, and nephew, Charles Allen, all of Dunedin, FL, as well as by the residents of Plainfield, to whom she was family.

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Dyer Family Portrait — Thanksgiving 1936
M. Arvilla, Arvilla, Priscilla, C. Frederick

Arvilla Lois Dyer: A Personal Profile

By Marty Dobrow

Unapologetically old-fashioned, Arvilla Dyer is as rooted in history as the Plainfield dirt that she has always called home. A veritable Rockwellian character, Dyer serves her hometown in a vast number of capacities—Town Clerk, President of the Historical Society, Editor of the Plainfield Post, Deacon of the Congregational Church, President of the Cemetery Association, etc. “I am,” she says with considerable understatement, “a very involved person.”

Later this summer, Dyer’s story—and that of her beloved town—will be told in a two-hour documentary made by Clio Associates of Florence. The film, presented by the Plainfield Volunteer Firefighters Association to the town’s Historical Society, will ensure the legacy of a Hilltown legend.¹

Full name: Arvilla Lois Dyer.

Nickname: Arv or Arvie.

Date and place of birth: January 21, 1923, in a lying-in hospital, Harkness Road, Pelham, Massachusetts.

Address: Plainfield, Massachusetts.

Job: Town Clerk; retired Army officer.

Marital status: Single.

Children: None.

Educational background: Amherst High School, 1941; Worcester State for two years; transferred to Western Michigan and graduated in 1945 with a B.S. in special education, majoring in occupational therapy.

Pets: Currently dog No. 4, named Jeanie, a border collie-greyhound mix.

What words come to mind when you look in the mirror?
Ugh!

Favorite book: I enjoy historical novels, suspense, mystery, etc.

Favorite movie: Must admit I haven’t been to the movies since “Sound of Music” in the 1960s.

Favorite television show: My television broke about 1981, and

with the poor quality of television programs I did not feel that it was worthwhile getting it fixed so I got rid of it.

Favorite song: No special favorite. Enjoy popular ones from the 40s, 50s, and 60s and some of the old hymns.

Hobbies: Plainfield history, genealogy of the early Plainfield families. I collect maps of this area and the places where I have lived. I also collect pictures of early Plainfield houses.

Formative experience: Growing up with the post office in our house, thus meeting all sorts of people. I guess you could say my 20 years in the U.S. Army Medical Specialist Corps was also formative.

What's the strangest job you ever held? I serve with two men on the Plainfield Cemetery Committee. Since they feel that they are not accurate enough, I am the one who marks out all of the graves for the grave digger.

Favorite comfort food: Chocolate! Or maple sugar.

When you want to get away from it all, where do you go? Outdoors. When I lived near the ocean, I went to the beach. Now, I hop in the car and drive on some back roads.

Favorite way to splurge: I am not much of a splurger. Buying paperbacks by my favorite authors, I guess, is my way of splurging.

Favorite item of clothing: Blue jeans.

Best present you've ever received: When I retired as an EMT after 14 years with the Cummington Ambulance, I was given a gift of a trip to California to attend the National Grange Session in Redding.

What one moment in your life would you like to do over again? On my way to an occupational therapy convention in Portland, Oregon, I stopped in California to visit my aunt, who was in a nursing home there. I had planned to visit her on my return but went straight home instead. I wish I had visited her again.

One little-known fact about you: I am a procrastinator.

What was your most irrational act? Can't think of any.

Secret ambition/fantasy: I want to write the "History of Plainfield."

One product, trend, or fashion you'd like to see return: Respect for the flag. People should stand up when it passes in a parade, and men should take off their hats. It is the symbol of our country.

Don't people have any respect for our country?

Achievement of which you are most proud: Promotion to Lieutenant Colonel in the Army.

Pet peeve: As above, disrespect for the flag.

Favorite way to blow off steam: I have a quick temper, and when I lose it, it is for such a short time that I don't have time to blow off steam except to yell at the person or object which has irritated me.

Most valuable lesson you've learned so far: Be patient, but I am not usually.

One thing you do better than anyone else: Relax.

What gives you the creeps? Creepy crawly things.

Most embarrassing moment: In basic training I was Company Commander, and during one inspection I followed the inspecting officer into the barracks and left the "troops" standing in the hot sun.

One thing you would change about yourself: That's for me to know and others to guess.

People who knew you in high school thought you were: I believe the yearbook said, "Her object all sublime she will achieve in time."

Personal strength: Ask someone else.

Personal weakness: Ask someone else.

Whom do you most admire? No one in particular.

1. This video is available for viewing at the Shaw Memorial Library in Plainfield.

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Plainfield Gathers to Celebrate Arvilla Dyer's 80th Birthday

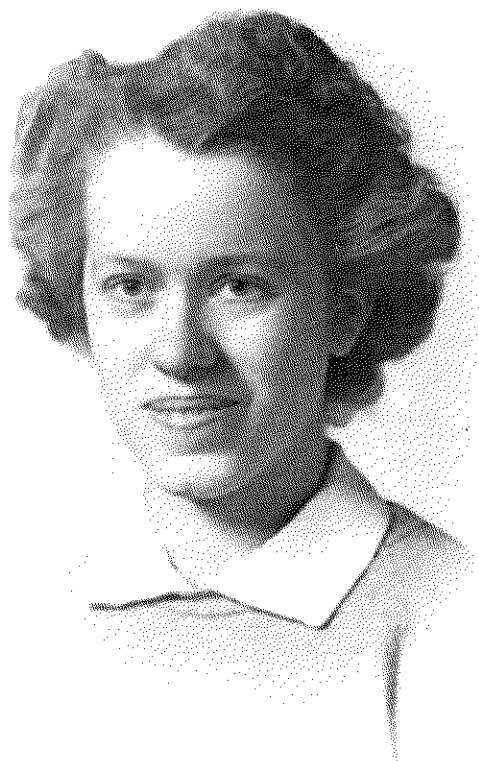
PLAINFIELD—In what Ann Irvine described as a “mini-celebration,” town residents and friends came out in full force on Tuesday to celebrate the 80th birthday of Main Street resident Arvilla Dyer. Arvilla has served her country, her family, and her community for all of her adult life, and a public celebration was in order to honor her for her dedication and selfless giving.

Irvine introduced the party, which directly followed a special Town Meeting at Hathaway Hall. Rather than go into a long speech about all of the boards, committees, and jobs that Arvilla has led, Irvine, instead, asked her husband, Allen, and new town residents Dario and Rebecca Coletta to honor her with a song. Touching on many of her past and present occupations, the trio sang about her years serving in the Army, retiring to come back to Plainfield and care for her parents (Arvilla retired as a Lieutenant Colonel), her 14 years as an EMT, her involvement in the church, and her continued service as Town Clerk. Leading the trio, Dario, in patter style, entertained Arvilla as well as everyone in the audience with his wonderful voice and playful lyrics to the tune of Gilbert and Sullivan’s “I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major General.” June Persing provided accompaniment on the piano. Persing also played the traditional “Happy Birthday” song as everyone sang along.

Peri Kelly baked a delicious chocolate cake (Arvilla’s favorite!), which was presented by June Schusser. Jim Feeley then presented Arvilla with a gift certificate for a trip to Hawaii to be funded by donations from Arvilla’s many friends throughout town and beyond. Arvilla’s mother was a missionary and taught school in Hawaii, and Arvilla herself served there in the Army. She took her parents there for their 50th wedding anniversary and has often talked of returning someday. The townspeople would like to make that a reality for her and have set up a fund through the Plainfield Congregational Church for accepting donations.

Once the formalities were over, everyone gathered around Arvilla, wished her personal birthday greetings, and enjoyed her reminiscences and stories about some of her experiences over the last 80 years.

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*Arvilla Dyer, Thanksgiving 1945,
college graduation picture*