

Tell me something interesting



My wife, Carol, was a courageous world traveler.

by Paul Huebner

“Tell me something interesting!” That was how Carol Huebner liked to begin her English lessons, encouraging her Chinese students, young and old alike, to use the language creatively. Despite living with multiple sclerosis for 35 years and weathering two bouts of cancer, Carol happily donated her time over the last 10 years to help students practice their English. Her life in China spanned an exceptional period of vast change and she was a part of it, encouraging her students to see their own country in a positive light. Cancer finally took her life, but not before she had contributed so much to our community as well as writing frequently about her experiences living abroad. She was a true friend of China!

An English teacher turned high school administrator, Carol raised two prize-winning professional musicians, one joining the New York Philharmonic and another building a performance career in country western music. Carol also wrote and self-published three books. After the gradual decline in her physical abilities required her to retire early, she became restless. She convinced me, her husband, to retire by promising to accompany me to China so I could pursue my interest in Chinese language and music. We moved to Shenyang, where I had studied at Liaoning University. Shenyang was not exactly a wheelchair-friendly city, but Carol soon discovered that where convenience failed, warm offers of help instantly appeared. Carol called this “people power” and found that using a wheelchair in China was never a barrier to wonderful friendships. With the help of my tutor, Carol soon had a nightly English practice group and college student book club.



Paul and Carol Huebner traveled extensively throughout China, where they had lived for 10 years. Photo courtesy of Paul Huebner

After our first year in Shenyang, my tutor, who lived in Dalian, suggested we try life in her hometown. It soon became clear that this charming coastal city was a place retired people could call home. We found a wonderful apartment with a view of the ocean and within walking distance from Dongbei University, where I would continue to study. It wasn't long before Carol invited students in our building to participate in a reading club. She also formed a lasting friendship with a local artist and teacher, Sarah, and began to teach English to her and her son as well as one or two of Sarah's art students. Sarah's gifted son painted us a brilliant image of old Dalian on a large canvas that still hangs in our dining room.

Crisscrossing the globe

Carol was a courageous world traveler, crossing the globe between China, America and Europe as well as traveling extensively in China. She faced many obstacles that would have made so many others in her situation call it quits! On the first leg of our journey from America, she had to be pulled to the front of the airplane on a blanket because there was no aisle wheelchair available. Boarding and leaving the aircraft were always a challenge, but on several occasions, flight attendants offered their help. Once, a wonderful Korean ground supervisor hoisted Carol on his back and carried her to her seat. Another time, a kind young Chinese flight attendant offered to help her to her seat, and as she lunged forward into his arms, the surprised look on his face was priceless.

When traveling in China, airport ground service was not particularly convenient for wheelchair travelers. There were forms to fill out to be able to use the airport wheelchairs and complicated procedures to check your own wheelchair. But then came that wonderful day when the front page of the Dalian newspaper pictured an army of attendants standing behind empty wheelchairs, all prepared to take on travelers with disabilities. I have to feel

that Carol's willingness to put up with the inconvenience of travel might have made a slight impact. We traveled often enough in China that service staff in airports would sometimes recognize us and agree to communicate problems to their managers.

Hotels in many countries seem to have no real standard for what constitutes an accessible room. We got in the habit of calling hotels directly and requesting pictures of the bathroom!

Always time for students

Without the heroic assistance of Carol's energetic caregiver Susie, we would have had a very difficult time. Susie, who is Chinese, helped smooth the way. Her knowledge of food often led us to wonderful local dishes. She was always patient and aware of the limited time Carol could be out and about. Together, Susie and I helped Carol shower and use the bathroom as well as get in and out of bed and dress.

At home, what Carol's students didn't see was the trial of preparation that she had to go through: dressing, using the bathroom, eating, putting on makeup and dealing with fatigue. Even one student a day could sometimes be very tiring for her and sometimes two or three were too much. Yet she continued to donate time to her students.

When her cancer returned and it became obvious that Carol just wasn't going to make it this third time, she accepted the diagnosis bravely and refused further treatment. "Tell Susie to sell the clothes!" she said. Her children were able to make one last visit. Her wonderful students and their parents poured out their love visiting her, preparing food and expressing concern.

There is a Chinese proverb that says, "If you are a teacher for one day, you are a parent for life." The day before Carol died, her oldest student called from his workplace in Chongqing. He was crying as he told her that she was like a grandmother to him. The next day, as I held her, Carol left this world quietly and at peace. It was her way of finally defeating all the physical ills that had plagued her.

Later, one of her student's parents wrote in Chinese: "Thank you for letting me know about the many fine elements of human nature: kindheartedness, beauty, strength and bravery. Your eyes have always been so clear, your smile always so lovely. I miss you. I am sorry, with my English so poor, I am unable to write even a few words, but you in heaven certainly can read Chinese!"

Paul Huebner received a master's degree in music at UCLA and spent 30 years as a piano teacher in the Los Angeles area. He and his wife, Carol, were married for 50 years, the last 10 of which were spent in China. Paul continues to live in Dalian, studying at Dalian University of Finance and Economics, as well as continuing his musical studies at Zhong Yin School, playing guqin and guzheng.