Bunny Sterin
Never Too Much Paddling, Skiing, or Commitment to Rivers – Just Not Enough Time

by Risa Shimoda

August 29, 2021 — Long-time RMS member, multiple chapter officer, unofficial photographer, and friend Bunny Sternin had to take a back seat to her courageous battle with lung cancer.

Bernice Sternin was born and raised in Swampscott, Massachusetts. She left the East for West to attend the University of Denver and Utah State University and secure a BA in Biology and MS in Watershed Science, respectively. She spent the majority of her thirty-five-year career working for the Bureau of Land Management.

Bunny was also an avid kayaker and rafter who ran the Grand Canyon multiple times, paddled in Patagonia, swam with humpback whales in Tonga, and watched the sunrise at the base of the Himalayas. She was a skilled wildlife photographer who shot one of the rarest animals on the planet, a Spirit Bear, in British Columbia.

Dennis Willis, past RMS President, recalls her early BLM days. “Bunny worked as a seasonal ranger on the San Juan out of Monticello, Utah in 1983-84. She moved to Price, Utah, in 1985-86 as a hydrologist and set up a thorough, thoughtful water quality monitoring program. They sampled water quality quarterly on all managed rivers and streams, including a handful of stations above and below significant confluences. Rangers trained to test for salinity, conductivity, etc., and they would fill bottles for chemical analysis for a hydrologist who would have a portable incubator to measure bacteria levels. I’ve not seen the likes of her monitoring program since.”

Reflecting on another aspect of Bunny’s approach to life and work, he shared, “Be glad you are not regularly shaving your legs. It was about 1981 – 82. An unnamed BLM manager issued an edict that female river rangers could not wear shorts unless they shaved their legs, and he would be the judge of adequacy and frequency of said shaving. Bunny went to war, insisting the edict be rescinded or that all river rangers be required to shave. She prevailed, to the relief of rangers everywhere. Bunny was an adventurer whose understanding of fear was relegated to a vague notion found in the dictionary.”

Bunny spent the 1990s in Anchorage, Alaska, working as a State hydrologist for the BLM. An avid skier, she volunteered as a ski patrol at Alyeska Resort, learning avalanche and mountaineering skills and emergency care. Considered one of the best and beloved by her fellow patrolers, she also coordinated and was recognized by Eagle River Rescue, a group of police, military and civilian, fire rescue, state troopers, and park rangers.

Bunny returned to the lower 48 to work in Vale, Oregon, on the Okhcever River; took a break to work for the US Forest Service in Jackson, Wyoming; and returned to school at the University of Idaho, where she authored what was perhaps the first training framework for river managers. After returning to the BLM and their Kremmling, Colorado office, she made a final move to Salt Lake City as the National Conservation Lead for Utah BLM. She worked with the Wild and Scenic Rivers team to develop a hallmark set of Wild and Scenic Rivers training modules.

Judi Zuckert, one of Bunny’s closest friends, has shared what might startle but not surprise: “Bunny was a tremendous adventurer and very comfortable in the wilderness. She slept more often on the ground than in her own bed. Her master bedroom faced the street, while an extra bedroom faced the creek in her backyard. She chose to sleep there in the much smaller room and use the hallway bathroom to hear the creek, leaving the larger and fancier master bedroom with a fancy shower, etc., for her guests.

Who else, while battling cancer for three years with remarkable strength and determination, would go snorkeling with whales in French Polynesia? Or lead me down a double-black diamond run at Snowbird? Or boat a remote Alaskan river one more time and plan another trip to Africa, even though she knew it would not be possible?

Bunny’s local boating buddies took her on her last trip on the San Juan River this past summer. Since she’d needed 24-hour oxygen for about a year, they hauled canisters of air for several days along with them.

Bunny taught me about river etiquette on river trips, when everyone would pitch in to cook and clean. She always offered to help at every meal and was appreciated one particular time when Frank and I were in charge of a meal for 18, and were not completely confident! I have always remembered this delightful characteristic of my friend, and I make a point of doing this now on trips.”

There has been no greater supporter of RMS from leading the 1998 Symposium in Anchorage as its Chair to being the Agency lead for the 2013 River Management Workshop in Grand Junction. She held several positions of chapter leadership: Alaska Chapter President (1999-2001), Northwest Chapter Vice President (2003-2005), Southwest Chapter Secretary (2006-2007), and Southwest Chapter President (2008-2011). An organizer of countless national and chapter events, RMS thanked her with the Contribution to the River Management Society Award in 2007.

Bunny offered countless hours to planning, leading, attending and following up River Management Society events and initiatives in roles that shouted commitment, care, talent and a love of our nation’s spectacular rivers. She was the go-to photographer for symposiums and workshops, and a reliably generous contributor of silent auction items. To the end. This past spring, she donated nearly two dozen personal jewelry items - silver earrings, pins, and bracelets - to the most successful-ever 2021 RMS Symposium auction.

Bunny’s family has created the Bunny Sternin Scholarship in the S.J. Quinney College of Natural Resources at Utah State University, intended for students pursuing a degree in river management.

This recollection represents interviews and online comments with and by colleagues and friends, including Judi Zuckert, Monica Zimmerman, Dennis Willis, Elaine Grace and David Cernicek.