

The Curator Says...Most of the dreams of childhood go unrealized and forgotten, but that was not the case in Char Warren's story about her husband Toby. As a child Toby fell in love with the game of baseball. Often he would go to sleep with his glove in his hand. As a teenager he excelled in the sport and after high school was drafted by his beloved Dodgers. Unseen circumstances, however, intervened and prevented his ever becoming involved in the sport—until his seventieth birthday!

MLB, Law Degree, or Ph.D.?

Charlotte Warren

When I met my soul mate, Toby, in college, he was on the baseball and football teams at USL. Because he was All-State in football, the university would not give him a baseball scholarship unless he agreed to play football also. His first love had always been baseball (I did my best to relegate that to second place!), as he had been interested in baseball since he was about four years old. His mom told me that he would fall asleep wearing his little baseball cap, with his glove on, as he would toss the ball up and catch it while lying in bed at night, looking at his favorite baseball cards on the ceiling, trying to go to sleep.

After WWII, Toby's Dad went to LSU to get his master's and Ph.D. degrees, then the family moved to Lafayette, Louisiana, where he taught and started the Special Education Department at what is now the University of Louisiana in Lafayette. Since he was a veteran they lived in Vet Village—the married housing at the University for returning veterans—so Toby spent his young years living on campus.

When we got engaged, Toby took me to meet the university head trainer and his close friend and mentor, Dutch Reinhardt. Dutch told me that when Toby was about five or six years old, if a fly ball was hit to the outfield, the coaches would have to stop almost every baseball practice and home game, as this little pint-sized kid would appear from nowhere, donning his little baseball uniform and glove, and catch the ball before the players could get to it. He drove them crazy—and probably made the team look bad! His favorite team was always the Brooklyn Dodgers. They were his heroes, and he knew every statistic about all of them—probably still does today.

When Toby was eleven, he was six feet tall and weighed 160 pounds. They thought he would be a giant. He stood head and shoulders above his classmates and outweighed them by forty pounds or so. Everyone thought he was at least sixteen years old, and he played on teams with 14-to-16-year-olds. He always played catcher and had a high batting average.

“His” Dodgers started scouting him at age eleven, and by the time he graduated from high school, they offered him a baseball contract to play for his beloved Dodgers. His mother and grandparents all had college degrees, and his Dad had a Ph.D., so earning a college degree was something that was hardly negotiable. Toby agreed that he would get his degree first, while the Dodgers continued to pursue him.

Toby was highly recruited after high school and had several offers to play both baseball and football, but he wanted to play for USL in his hometown of Lafayette. The

university would not give him a total baseball scholarship unless he played both sports in college. While he preferred playing baseball only, he had been All-State in high school, and voted Mr. Athlete his senior year, so ULL badly wanted him to play both sports. In his junior year, he injured his shoulder playing football and required surgery. After the shoulder surgery, his baseball swing was affected, and he lost a quarter of his swing on his follow-through at bat. He was crushed and gave up both of his scholarships as the university needed someone to replace him, and this freed them to do it. This was a very rough time for him, as playing for the Dodgers had been the only thing he had ever wanted to do. No plan B was in place. What would he do? He was very depressed for a few weeks but knew he had to get on with his life and make some decisions. He started talking about getting a law degree, as he had never lost a debate in high school. That changed when we started dating, as he lost a few arguments after we started dating! and he still does. He also spoke of maybe getting an MBA. That would have made his daddy proud.

I graduated a year before he did, and we got married in his senior year. Within two-and-a-half years, we had two babies, and his new job after graduation kept him so busy that law school or grad school was out of the question at this point in our lives. So, MLB, law degree and Ph.D. were all off the prospective horizon.

Our 49th anniversary was on September 4, 2014, and Toby's seventieth birthday was on September 24. Under normal circumstances, both of those occasions would have been ushered in with great celebration—*any reason—or no reason for a party!* These, however, were no “normal” circumstances, as I was flat on my back having just had double back surgery. I barely knew who I was, let alone the dates. Try as we did, it didn't even come close to a celebration. Toby, as usual, was amazing through this time and kept saying his best gift was for me to get well. What a keeper!

For my seventieth birthday, our three amazing kids had given me a blow-out party to beat all parties, so I was feeling even worse short-changing Toby. Enter our three great children! They decided to surprise their Dad with sending him to Vero Beach, Florida, for the Dodgers' Fantasy Baseball Camp, which was taking place in November. For two weeks, gifts arrived in the mail—a new glove, cleats, Dodger shirts, sox, underwear, a batting glove, and a full set of luggage. I guess they were afraid he would embarrass himself, *and us*, as he wanted to wear his fifty-year-old cleats!! (He had them all shined and ready to go.)

They had a driver pick him up that Saturday morning at 6:00 a.m., and drive him to the airport, so he wouldn't have to drive and worry about parking and luggage. How thoughtful was that?! He communicated with the four of us throughout the week by texts and phone calls. It was such fun as all four of us texting and feeling a part of every activity, as he sent pictures of every event. He couldn't stop talking about the staff of fifteen retired Dodger greats who served as the coaches, eating meals with them, coaching the forty players in **two games a day**, (not bad for old guys ranging from their 20s to 80s!), and entertaining them with tales regaling their days of glory.

The camp is the actual facility used when the Dodgers were in Brooklyn, and since the Dodgers have moved to Los Angeles, Historic Dodger Town is now used for conferences, meetings, and fantasy camps. They have been hosting these camps for years, and the place looks just like a country club—beautifully manicured, complete with street signs named after the greats, like Sandy Koufax Boulevard and Don Drysdale Lane. Their own chef and trainer were there, and the meals were to die for, Toby said. They had a Surf

and Turf Night, Western Barbecue, with burgers, ribs, chicken, sausage, steaks, the trimmings, complete with a western band and a bonfire.

The best part of the week was the camaraderie that took place with the campers, who ranged in age from two young whippersnappers in their 20s, some in their 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s and two in their 80s. Everybody there felt like a kid again *until* the second day. They started every morning with stretching exercises, fielding, catching, and batting practice, and **then playing in two nine-inning games!** Quite a feat for the old timers! Toby said all you heard were moans when they had to do anything but eat or breathe. Toby thought hitting and playing ball is like riding a bike—something you never forget. WRONG! You may think it, but at 70, your body doesn't react like it did at twenty or even forty. The first fly ball that Toby ran to catch during a game, he tripped and fell. He was mortified, and texted us that being seventy "sucks." He said he found out you can't catch a fly ball wearing bifocals! We got a real kick out of that text.

He redeemed himself the third day, as his hand - eye coordination began to kick in. He hit a double, driving in three runs and they won the game 9-6. That night, he texted us a picture of former great Johnny Washington handing him the MVP award for that game. He was floored and very excited!

The last night, they all sat up late in the Dodger Lounge exchanging phone numbers and addresses, and hating to say goodbye, as all were leaving very early the next morning to fly home. As much fun as Toby had, he said the best part of the whole week was meeting so many guys from all over the United States, one from Mexico, two from Korea, one from Italy, and all from different backgrounds and different ages.

Toby said the best part of the week was the networking with men of similar passion for the game and including the three kids and me in the loop to share in his experiences. He and Maury Wills, one of his heroes and new BFF, speak on the phone several times a week and text one another nearly every day. Maury told me on the phone that Toby had more fun than all of the other campers put together. He knew every camper by name and they all knew him. Peter O'Malley, the president and CEO has called and written to Toby several times and sent him a postcard last week saying simply, "Toby, I miss you." Signed, Peter O'.

At dinner on the last night, as they announced the MVPs of the day for both games, the last award was announced. Toby's name was called, and he was presented with the one award that is given to the camper who is chosen by the professional staff, not on ability or batting average, but as the exemplary camper. He was in such shock when his name was announced that he froze. Maury Wills had to push him up to go and receive it, as Toby thought there must be some mistake. It has only been awarded seven times out of 44 camps and is an actual sixteen-inch trophy, engraved with Toby's name on it. It is the Sonny Carter Award, named after a camper who attended the camp in 1988 and was loved by the staff and campers alike. Sonny was a medical doctor, professional soccer player, avid golfer, huge Dodger Fan, and NASA astronaut who exemplified what they wanted in a camper. Sonny Carter was killed, along with Texas senator John Tower in a commercial airplane crash while on NASA business a few years after retiring from the space program. It is the highest award given, and Toby was humbled by it and so grateful.

So Toby *never got a law degree*, but he *did play with MLB* staff in a game (and lost 12-0), and the first award he received was patterned after a former Dodger trainer who

looked like a Mr. Potato Head, so he actually *got his Ph.D.* after all—the *Potato Head Doll*, and he has the autographs on it to prove it. He has said that even if he gets Alzheimer's, he will never forget what his kids did to make his seventieth the best birthday ever!

Thank you, Monty, Stephanie, and Tucker!

Char Warren Says... I was born on St. Patrick's Day, the second of four daughters to my parents, Calmes and Sadie La Cour Cox. I turn 73 on St. Patrick's Day. We lived all of my childhood in Opelousas, Louisiana, also the birthplace of Jim Bowie, inventor of the Bowie Knife. I have always had a passion for reading and learning, and was always challenged to be the best student I could be, as I was salutatorian of my high school class and in the college honor society. I thrived on participating in many college organizations and was honored to serve Louisiana's Sugar Industry as its Queen in 1961.

My biggest loves have always been my faith, family and friends. I am proud that my husband, Toby, and I celebrated our 50th Anniversary in September 2015. We enjoy three children and four grandchildren. My hobbies are cooking/entertaining, decorating for any and all holidays, and serving others in our church, as well as welcoming "drop in" company at any hour. I love the many opportunities that come my way to serve others.

I participate in a women's Bible study, have served on many teams for faith-based retreats and served on committees at St. Michaels, and have volunteered for almost twelve years at the Christian Care Ministries Soup Kitchen in Opelika. I have been an OLLI member for seven years, serving as chairman of the Social Committee for two years.