





## HISTORY OF A FRIENDSHIP

# Unbreakable

**George Zoulalian '66** and **Laverne Berry '67**

bonded over rice pilaf and creamed chipped beef,  
and cooked up a remarkable friendship.

By **Janetta Stringfellow**

Photos by **Walter Crump**

**HANCOCK 1964**

*MELT THE BUTTER! (Or, What is Rice Pilaf?)*

**A** Head Cook, mad with power, is in an Armenian shish kebab frenzy. “You’re in charge of the pilaf!” he barks at the new sophomore on his meal crew—an African American girl who has just started at Commonwealth after the Medford school she was to attend had a massive fire. And, who, until a few months earlier, had never even heard of private school, or, until that very moment, rice pilaf. But, the meal must go on. The Armenian devil zips by again, waving his arms and shrieking, “MELT THE BUTTER! MELT THE BUTTER!” So, she melts the butter, and a friendship (not to mention a fabulous meal in a barn) is born.

*If We Weren't Dissatisfied, We Weren't Alive*

When I tell Bill Wharton and a group of current students that George and Laverne used to fly kites on the roof of the School and on Fridays they'd pop popcorn (with Jon Hiatt '66) on a Bunsen burner in a study nook, they gasp with horror and envy, respectively. The ethos of Commonwealth is in many ways the same as it was a half century ago, but it's also evolved. Students old and new love to cite the "no roller skating" rule, but while no one's allowed to do *anything* on the roof these days, with or without a kite or wheels, in many ways George and Laverne's Commonwealth was much more strict than it is today. They describe Charles Merrill's reign as a combination of "discipline and theater." "He used to walk around the lunchroom, look over my shoulder and say, 'We *will* have some broccoli for lunch today, *won't we?*'" remembers Laverne. And George had to check the student board every Friday afternoon (bowl of popcorn in hand, presumably) to see if he was on the "get a haircut by Monday or don't come to school" list. "We were all so focused on getting Mr. Merrill's approval," he recalls.

Even though they were a year apart, had no classes together, and were from different backgrounds, George and Laverne in many ways were a perfect fit and have been integral parts of each other's lives since that fateful fall Hancock (Laverne's first and George's third). Both felt like "outsiders"—neither had Harvard professors as fathers, they joke—which, along with a common love of theater, dancing, parties, and a strong commitment to political activism and volunteer work, have given them a 47-year bond. ("We talk about politics all the time. Other friends have changed their views over the years, but we never have.")

Commonwealth provided many "first times" for both of them, even with little things like food. It was the first time either of them ever had freshly baked "healthy" bread (Wednesdays were bread-and-soup days back then). They were introduced to chipped beef, Welsh rarebit—meals they had never heard of before. When Laverne finally got a much-begged-for sleepover with a friend, Carla Townes '67 (Laverne's mother usually didn't allow them), it was the weekend Carla's dad, Charles, got the call that he had won the Nobel Prize in Physics. They recall the time as very intense both in and outside of school. "There was a lot of angst; if we weren't dissatisfied we weren't alive. Commonwealth and Charles Merrill have been woven indelibly on our brains for a long time. High school is special for everyone, but this place is in particular."

Laverne lived in a black enclave in Medford. Her American-born Barbadian father worked at Boston Woven Hose and Rubber Company, and her mother worked factory jobs and at times as a domestic to supplement their income. When Laverne's Medford school was badly damaged in a fire, they announced that classes would only be offered only 3½ hours a day. Laverne, already thinking like a Commonwealth student, decided that really wasn't enough time to learn anything. She remembered that Claire (Kuperberg) DeBakey '67, a former Medford classmate, had left to go to a different school, so she found out the name, got herself an interview, and even though the admissions season had long since passed, was accepted for enrollment for her sophomore year. Her parents weren't involved in this decision at all: "They were fabulous, but they just wouldn't have thought of it." She remembers meeting Charles Merrill as "the first time I was ever really scared." It was a life-changing moment. A young girl who had never heard of private school was suddenly commuting by bus and the Green Line to

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school in a Back Bay mansion; a girl who had never before seen a play performed was about to throw herself into the worlds of dance and theater, and she was about to meet George.

George's parents were Armenians living in Revere. He heard about Commonwealth while helping his father work a construction job in Winthrop. He remembers his interview as "totally scary," and that John Hughes scoffed at the "long" essay on his application, which amounted to only a few sentences. But he got in and learned how to write, speak French, and throw a pot. He had never had to write anything at his former schools in Revere, and when he graduated, Charles Merrill told him, by way of a compliment, "When you first came here, you wrote with an asparagus." George's father built cabinets for the School in lieu of paying for his tuition (George can even point to some of his father's work as he walks down the stairs to the Dartmouth lobby). He was one of only two students who took the Blue Line, a memory that still resonates. Laverne's mother wondered about their friendship ("People in general weren't happy when we walked down the street together"), but George soon won her over by making the Berrys lunch at their home one Saturday. Years later, still trying to piece it together, she finally declared, "George isn't white. He's Armenian!"

## COLLEGE AND BEYOND

### *We Can't Stop Now*

George graduated from Commonwealth in 1966 and headed to Amherst College. Laverne followed him to Mt. Holyoke a year later. They described both schools as “pressure cookers.” But they had each other to lean on. Calling 15 miles down the street was considered “long distance” then, not to mention that in this era long before the Internet or even cell phones they had to rely on the dorm payphone. They mailed postcards. Laverne might write mid-week that on Friday she was finishing classes at 5 or working until 6 and that she’d arrive in Amherst on the 7 p.m. bus, and George would meet her. Or George would hitchhike down to Mt. Holyoke. Their circles of friends intertwined in a network that remains much the same to this day.

Laverne, a theater and dance major, lived in the largest and most diverse dorm with 140 women, 14 of whom were black. Students called it “The Ghetto.” When the housemother told one of Laverne’s close white friends that she should stop hanging out with Laverne and her black roommate, Laverne went straight to the dean to say that the housemother needed to lay off, that this was just the way it was going to be. She attributes her moxie to Commonwealth, where she had learned to express what she felt. “People are people,” she thought. “It’s just that sometimes the people are older than you.”

George remembers Amherst as a hotbed of political activism, and he jumped right in. Inspired by his own family’s values, joining the March on Washington in 1963, and his time at Commonwealth, he began to work for political campaigns and even attended the wild 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Laverne followed a path in entertainment, George in social services. Laverne went to graduate school in film and TV in Syracuse, worked for the New York State Commission on Cable Television in Albany, made her way up the production ladder in New York City, and finally, in the ’90s, decided somewhat reluctantly to go to law school. “It wasn’t a real career change; I was doing the same kind of work I did before in distribution and contracts,” but even though part of her thought, “Who wants to go to law school?” it proved a sound move, and now she has her own entertainment law practice.

With the help of Charles Merrill and others, George avoided the draft (his number was 83) when he graduated from Amherst in 1970. He went to work at Judge Baker Children’s Center and taught ceramics to emotionally disturbed kids. He eventually got a master’s degree and was a social worker until he retired in 2003. He stayed in the Boston area, but remained close to Laverne, visiting her when and where he could, and Laverne would always spend time with George back in Boston over the Christmas holidays, usually bringing her mother and aunt to George’s annual Christmas Eve party. When George met his wife, Mary Ann, in the early ’90s and thought his new familial obligations would keep him from seeing Laverne during the holidays, Laverne got on the phone with Mary Ann herself and said, “Listen, George and I have spent part of Christmas together for 27 years. We can’t stop now.” Mary Ann and George arrived at Laverne’s parents’ house that night.

## FRIENDSHIP FROM A DISTANCE

### *What Would You Like for Dinner?*

Forty-seven years of friendship creates a lot of stories... In the ’70s and ’80s George and Laverne would talk on the phone before work each day. People Express ran a \$19 air shuttle from Boston to New York, so on Fridays George would call and ask, “What would you like for dinner?” Then he’d do the shopping, catch the shuttle, let himself into Laverne’s apartment (they’ve always had sets of each other’s keys), and have dinner waiting for her when she got home from a long day of production.

In the late ’80s, Laverne’s mother and George’s father both had kidney failure and needed dialysis at the same time. When George’s father received a transplant and only family members were allowed in the intensive care unit, Laverne posed as George’s “black wife.”

Laverne was waiting at the Zoulalian home when George and Mary Ann brought their new son, Stephen, home from the hospital in 1995.

Five years ago, Laverne was diagnosed with endometrial cancer. When she called George to tell him, he started crying and had to hang up the phone. Mary Ann called Laverne back to let her know that George would be down to Brooklyn to shop and cook so that when Laverne returned home from her surgery, she’d have everything she needed—including George.

They’ve traveled together throughout New England, visited countless museums, and stayed up until 2 a.m. perfecting the croissant. Laverne arranged a surprise tour of abandoned train tunnels under Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn (though she stayed above ground!). They have celebrated Thanksgivings and milestones with each other’s families. Last year, when Laverne turned 60, she had one of her famous “decade parties.” She always asks someone close to her to be her partner for her carefully choreographed “start-off dance.” This time she asked Stephen, then 15, and they practiced their dance steps ahead of time over Skype.

## TODAY

### *You Look Fabulous for 28*

Jealous yet? I certainly was when I was talking to them, even though I have many long-time friends. They strolled into the School for their interview and photo shoot chatty, happy, and comfortable. As Laverne came up the stairs in the Commonwealth lobby, she turned to George and said, “This is where Rob Goldston [’68] told me I had fat ankles.” As they were getting ready to leave and my head was swimming with their tales, they said: Wait! We haven’t told you our “catch phrases” yet. And they stepped into what sounds like a comedy routine of private jokes.

“Once when Laverne was at a dance audition, the director told her that she ‘looked fabulous for 28,’ so we’ve said that to each other ever since.”

“Laverne’s mother always said that we were the ‘jet set without the jet’” (People Express aside, naturally).

“George’s mother, Sharkey, taught us ‘when you see it, buy it,’ a phrase we both try to live by.”

“I always call Laverne the ‘black Mary Tyler Moore....’”

They continue with the laughter and lines as they walk out of Commonwealth to take a stroll down Newbury Street on a gorgeous spring afternoon. I watch them go, itching to get inside to tell all my friends, “Wait until you hear what George and Laverne told me!...”