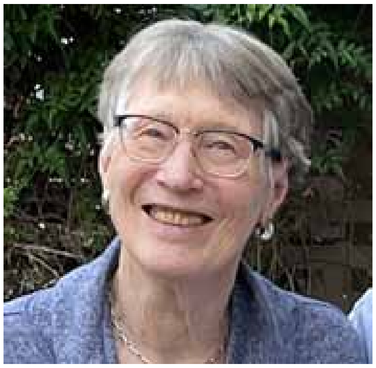
CARINGBRIDGE

Karin Forssell Sep 10, 2023



Christine Forssell

All of a sudden, here we are. To start at the end: my mom / Christine / Mormor is at Stanford Hospital waiting on tests to learn what kind of cancer is in her body. If we're lucky, 1) it's melanoma and 2) she will be among the 50% who respond well to treatment. So please send good thoughts or pray or buy good luck charms… we'll accept all your good wishes.

What happened? Here's the longer story.

Over the last couple weeks, Christine was suddenly much weaker. The first time I was aware of it was when her legs gave out on the way to the pool one morning. She wasn't hurt, but something was wrong. At first we thought her Parkinson's was just getting worse. (We later learned that PD doesn't typically decline so rapidly.)

She started sweating a lot, all the time. She complained of nebulous pains in her side. She needed help getting out of bed. Everything hurt. She started napping a lot. She started coughing at meals.

We had an appointment with her neurologist NP, who said this is not Parkinson's. She sent us to urgent care to test for a UTI. We were very excited to have a different explanation, and one that could be treated with antibiotics! But that turned out negative. The antibiotics made no difference.

We went to her primary care physician on Friday the 8th. She noticed that Christine was breathing rapidly. She too felt there must be an infection of some kind. On her advice, we went from her office directly to the emergency room. We hoped antibiotics and a blood culture would get her on the path to set things right.

I stayed with Christine that night. In the ER, they kept looking for answers. People showed up to draw blood and prod her belly and ask the same questions. Where does it hurt? How long has this been going on? Her lactate levels were mysteriously high.

They eventually gave her a CT scan. Finally, in the middle of the night, a gentle doctor came to tell us that the scan showed nodules in several places, along with blood clots on her lungs. They started her on a blood thinner for the blood clots. They admitted her to the hospital and we got a room at 4:30 in the morning. The kind nurses got her coffee, and I got a cot! I'm not sure which one of us was happier.

The next morning, my dad and Lisa joined us. Soon enough, the four of us met with the care team to hear the full story of what they had seen on the images (side note: it is fascinating what you can see with modern technologies!). The doctors were clear: it looks like cancer. The big question then became: what kind?

This pdf file holds text and pictures
extracted from the CaringBridge site.
By Dag Forssell, December 6, 2024

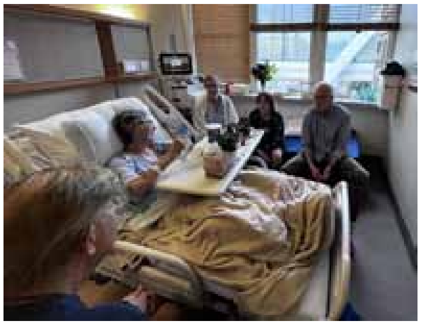
Christine has had skin cancer for decades. In addition to regular treatment of basal cell carcinoma, she had a melanoma a couple years ago. It turns out that you can have melanomas in all sorts of places. They showed us suspicious marks in her liver, spine, and lungs. For those of you new to cancer, the fact that it is in several organs means it's stage four.

All this is, of course, very scary. However, they quickly shared that melanoma is a kind of cancer that has some great new therapies. Far from the toxic chemotherapies used for some cancers, there are relatively gentle options for this one. Approximately 50% of patients respond well to a systematic and targeted treatment.

We won't know for sure until they biopsy a sample. She is on the list to try to see interactive radiology tomorrow or maybe Tuesday. It could take a couple days to get the results. They might start her therapy before sending her home. So we'll see… Maybe we're here for a while.

The staff has been fantastic and the food is good. They've been very careful to make sure Christine gets her Parkinson's medication right on schedule. She's resting comfortably and breathing better already.

As it happens, this past week was a birthday week for Lisa and me. So we enjoyed some cake in the hospital room. Gotta keep doing the fun things!



September 11, 2023

Karin Forssell Sep 11, 2023

Grateful for…

There is so much to be grateful for.

Our family likes each other.
We live near each other.
We have a wonderful senior care center with a geriatrics doctor we love.
We live close to a world-class hospital.
We live at a time when technology makes it much easier to diagnose a problem.
There are many new therapies that can make treating illnesses easier and more effective.
There are also therapies for comfort and palliative care.
We can stay in touch with family and friends over long distances, which is perhaps the greatest comfort.

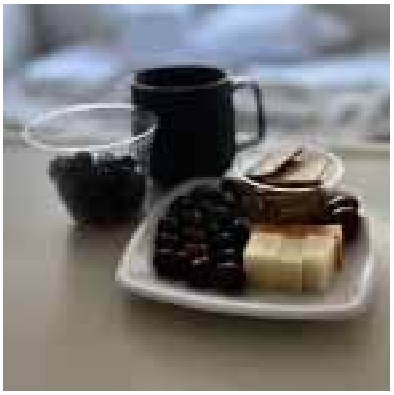
That's just a short list off the top of my head. Feel free to add more suggestions in the comments.

Karin Forssell Sep 12, 2023

MRI results are good

After a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad time in the MRI last night, the results were good. No cancer in the brain. And although there is cancer in the (bone in the) spine, it's not causing compression between the vertebrae.

The biopsy is scheduled for tomorrow afternoon.



Biopsy taken. Let's eat!

At last, the biopsy was done today. They took a cancer sample using Interventional Radiology (https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interventional_radiology). The procedure went smoothly. Now we wait for the results, which can take several days.

Afterward, Christine enjoyed a hot omelette, tomato bisque, fresh berries, and coffee. She wasn't allowed to eat anything after midnight, so dinner at 4p today was extra tasty! I'm attaching a pic of the fruit and cheese plate she ordered for later.

In general, she is doing better than when we arrived Friday. She's breathing better and has good color. She no longer sweats all the time. Careful to sit up while eating, she has not been coughing as much or as severely. Her pain is mostly under control. The nurses are great about bring her PD medication on time. She can also ask for pain meds whenever she wants.

Karin Forssell Sep 15, 2023

Yay! it's melanoma!

No one wants to have metastatic cancer. But if you have it, finding out that it's melanoma is cause for celebration. So… HOORAY!! IR confirmed this afternoon that the tumor they biopsied in Christine's liver was a melanoma nodule.

This whole experience has been a whirlwind of new lessons to learn. We continue to gain insights by the hour. The last day has included

Learning more about cutting edge immunotherapies for melanoma. We're still getting our bearings but so far, we're hopeful https://stanfordhealthcare.org/medical-treatments/i/immunotherapy-melanoma/patient-care-resources.html

Realizing that Christine's spine is fractured in several places. This may explain a great deal of her pain. Treating the cancer in her bones will help, but we're exploring other therapies too.

Trying out a back brace with the occupational therapist. Christine liked it! She stood up for the first time in a week.

Finding out about the palliative care team. They will visit tomorrow to talk more about pain management. This will help her get up and about.

Learning about home health care and skilled nursing facilities (SNF = “sniff”). We now understand better why SNF is likely the best next step. Christine will get a lot of help with OT and PT to get mobile again. She has a bed at a really good SNF starting Saturday (tomorrow). We hope that Christine will be able to move home and continue treatment from there in a couple weeks.

Thanks for your cards and comments! Christine loves hearing from you all.
Goodnight!

Karin Forssell Sep 16, 2023

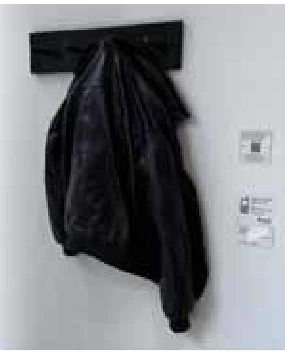
Moving day #2, part 1

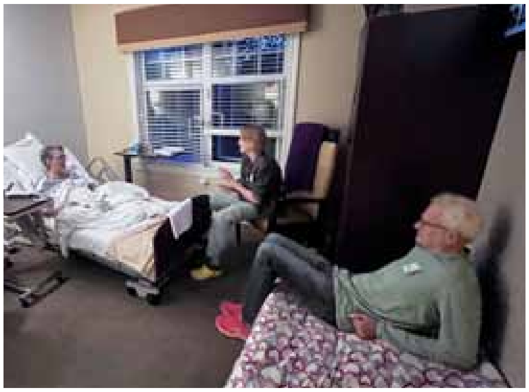
On week ago, Christine was admitted to Stanford Hospital. I’ll call that moving day #1. Today, she moves out: move #2. I’ll share more about her SNF in a separate post.

It’s clear that the staff at the hospital do all that they can to help make the visit as comfortable as possible. What’s not to love about adjustable beds, warmed blankets, and good food on demand? For those of us roaming around, the grounds and artwork are lovely. I’ve attached a few photos.

With very few exceptions, the staff has been wonderful. Even the security guard who caught me wandering the halls after closing (on a mission to the vending machines) was very gentle when he explained that I should stay in Christine’s room. The nurses offer to bring Christine coffee from their own staff room when she wants a midnight snack.

We’ve loved the nurses who take the time to listen to my mom and to each of us, with our various needs and concerns. They are the best!





Karin Forssell Sep 17, 2023

Moving day #2, part 2

Christine is now comfortably ensconced in her own room at The Terraces, a senior living community in nearby Los Altos. It’s a quick 15 minutes from home. We have set up an air mattress in the room so Dag can sleep over. Learn more about the Terraces Skilled Nursing at https://www.humangood.org/the-terraces-at-los-altos/post-acute-rehab.

Arriving in time for dinner last night, she pronounced the food excellent. Later in the evening, we all enjoyed cookies Siri had baked. It’s a blessing to be on an unrestricted diet. (Yes, I’m a bit fixated on the food. Enjoy the small pleasures!)

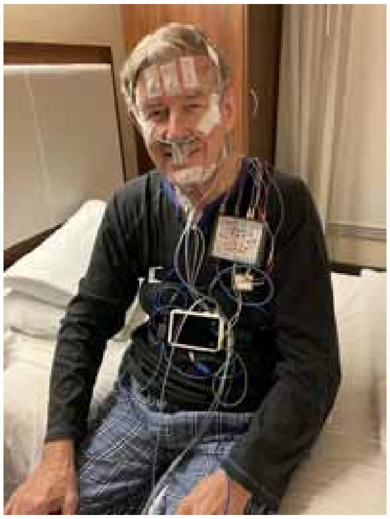
Her plan is to recover from her hospital stay for a couple weeks. She will have physical and occupational therapy almost every day, while working with Palliative Care to address her pain. We’ll have more information soon about how to visit. She loves to talk with friends.

It will take about that much time for more cultures to be done on her melanoma, which will determine the treatment plan. For example, it would be of interest to know if she has a BRAF mutation (https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/braf-mutation-and-cancer). Fingers crossed for something (more) easily treatable!

Of course, she still has Parkinson's. That's not going away. But with good pain management and rehabilitation services, she's hoping to get back to a lifestyle of daily swimming, walks around the neighborhood, lunches out with friends, and family dinners. Maybe even a cruise or two! We've talked a lot about what makes for quality of life and she's quite clear: she wants to be free of pain and able to have meaningful conversations. One way or another, that's what we're aiming for.

Karin Forssell Sep 18, 2023

Caring for the caregiver



Many of you have been asking how my dad / Dag / Morfar is doing. Thanks for asking. He introduces himself to all new faces as "the doting husband." He says his primary purpose is to take care of Christine. He is the first in line to sleep in the cot in her room, set alarms for her pills, buy her a new walker, or bring her flowers. (Yes, you can teach an old Dag new tricks!) We should all be so lucky as to have someone like him.

And yet, it's also true that a caregiver who doesn't take care of himself can't do much for anyone else. He admits he is tired. All three of us, his girls, are worried about him. Each of us has had conversations with him about taking breaks. When Lisa or I offer to take a shift, he is pretty quick to take the hint to go shower, shave, nap, eat, swim, check email, and do errands.

Breaks also let him do important things like check his hearing and do an overnight sleep study. The photo shows him all decked out in sensors to determine if he still needs a CPAP machine. That night, he got one of the best nights' sleep in quite a while. (But yes, he still needs the CPAP.)

Lisa and I are eager to share the load. That said, we are also pretty busy with work, homes, and families. I am welcoming my new master's students this week. Lisa just hosted a big event at Apple. So we're happy that we also have Elizabeth on our team for 20 hours a week. She's a licensed caregiver with years of experience and a heart of gold. Last week, it quickly became obvious that she knows her way around a hospital. Most importantly, Christine loves having her.

This is a marathon, not a sprint. We need to pace ourselves to cross the finish line.

Karin Forssell Sep 19, 2023

Small steps

One thing about resting in the hospital is that it can be so hard to get up and moving again. But it's terribly important. We're slowly getting the message that the most effective cancer treatment depends on Christine being strong enough to walk into the clinic. Maybe she can come in a wheelchair, but she can't roll in on a gurney.

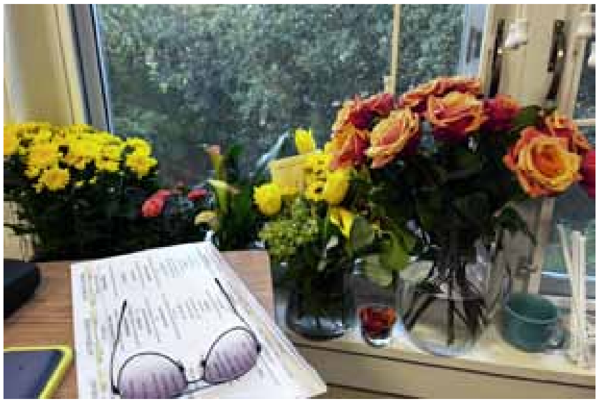
I'm still not clear on what that means. I think maybe that the doctors are worried that she's not going to be strong enough to deal with any side effects if she's still too weak to get out of bed. We're still waiting to talk to the melanoma specialists, and they're still waiting for the cell cultures to determine what treatment plan is best. So I'm the meantime, our focus is on getting Christine out of bed.

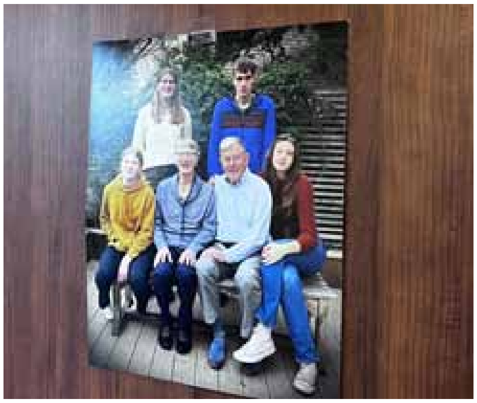
The physical therapy (PT) and occupational therapy (OT) as the Terraces is already making a difference. It's important that she not bend, lift, or twist (acronym BLT) because her spine is fragile and that increases her pain. She's learning to keep her back flat. They have taught her how to use her legs and opposite arm to turn over and use her elbow to sit up. They've given her a back brace (which she loves) to put on when she's upright. Once sitting, she is already able to stand herself up—the therapists say they're hardly helping her. Her arms and legs are stronger than her middle. She, however, wants them there in case she falls.

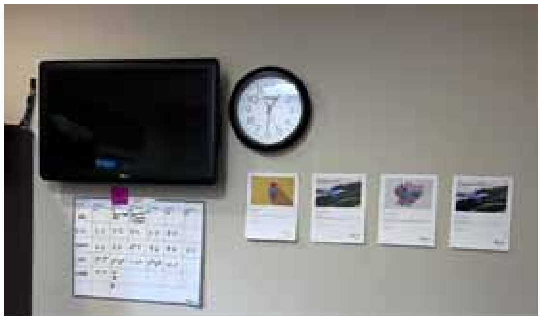
On Sunday, with the help of both OT and PT, she stood up once. On Monday, three times. Both times, she was very tired and promptly fell asleep. Today, PT came by and worked with her on exercises in bed. We hope she soon takes a few steps to sit in the wheelchair. Her short term goal is to get herself up and eat in the dining room (in a wheelchair) within a week. Later, they'll help her with daily activities such as getting in and out of the car. Her long term goal is to get back to normal life, which means walking. It won't be easy, so send her your applause for small steps, please.

Karin Forssell Sep 20, 2023

The little things that help







As a (learning) experience designer, I find it fascinating to notice the little things that make this situation a little more comfortable.

Pillows, lots of them, for getting comfortable.
Bed controls, for sitting up and lying down.
Tables (the kind that roll around and adjust to the height of the bed), for water, food, lip balm, tissues, and other important items to keep at hand.
Clock, to help Christine get oriented each time she wakes up and for keeping track of medications.
Calendar, for documenting who is coming when and for what purpose.
Flowers and a view, for a sense of the natural world outside.
Call button, for help when needed.
Phone, for staying in touch with friends and family.
Pictures of loved ones. Christine gazes at the photo of her grandchildren on the closet door.
Chairs, for visitors.

Why not have them all the time?
I suspect we will be making some upgrades when Christine comes home.

Karin Forssell Sep 21, 2023

Going home soon

Christine is too weak for treatment. The therapies would do more harm than good.

We are figuring out next steps now.

Karin Forssell Sep 22, 2023

Next steps

We're making plans for hospice now. As I think about the last few weeks, it strikes me that we are so lucky to have a wealth of resources supporting us on this journey.

When we were in the doctor's office on September 8, the doctor helped write out the Parkinson's medication schedule in a way that would help the ER team administrate Christine's meds on her usual schedule. It made a world of difference for her during the week in the hospital.

When we were leaving the hospital and looking for good care to get her on her feet again, the doctor gave us a short list of her favorite SNFs. One of them was willing to take her insurance and had a bed open immediately. My friends and colleagues agreed that it was one of the best. The decision was easy.

Now we're talking to hospice. The doctor, the SNF, and our friends all recommend Mission Hospice and Home Care (https://www.missionhospice.org/). We met with them today. They will move Christine home on Sunday and set her up with a bed and other stuff to make her comfortable. She is looking forward to being at home with her family, in her own space.

I wonder how other people manage without all the support we have received? Despite the sadness I feel for the situation we are in, I also feel incredibly grateful to have so much help navigating this new path.

Karin Forssell Sep 23, 2023

Friends, Food, and Flowers

Many thanks for all the offers of help. We feel blessed to have you in our lives.

Friends

Christine has never been happier than when she is talking with friends. Unfortunately, her energy is waning and she's not able to have many guests or calls. But you can talk to her!

I invite you to contribute to a group video for Christine, sharing stories of your friendship. Any little memory of a time you spent together is welcome, such as how you met, something you learned from her, a meal you shared, or a time she made you happy. She will be able to play it over and over.

We are collecting the videos all this week. Tap the link to get started recording a 60-second memory: https://app.memento.com/i/yo3vq6bjqy

Food

We welcome your help in feeding Christine and her caregivers (us!) over the next few weeks. We don't need something every day, but we want it to be easy for you to pick a day if you'd like to.

This is the Meal Train for The Forssell family :

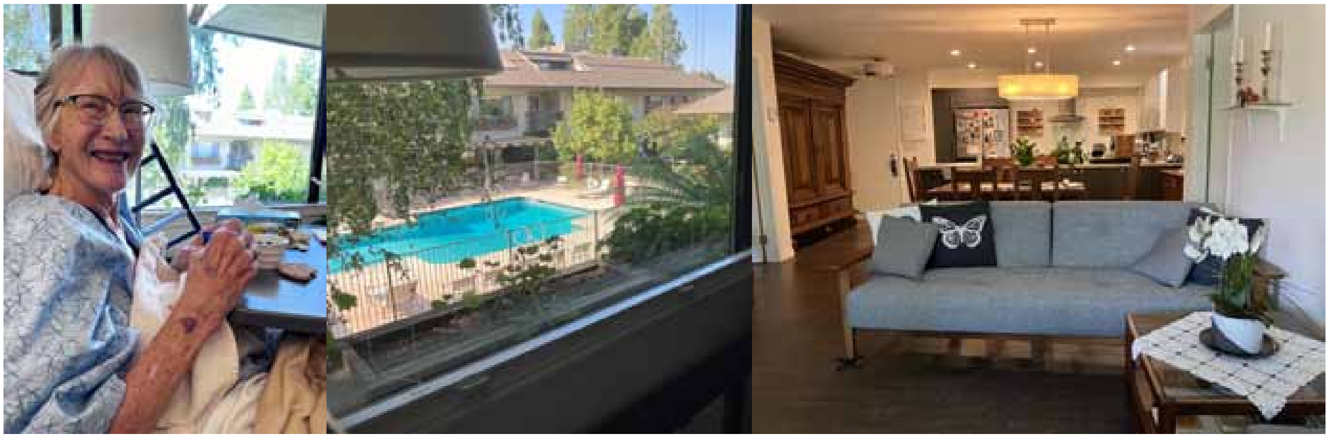
https://mealtrain.com/9emnzl. MealTrain.com is a free meal calendar tool that makes planning meals among a large group easy. Here are some tips: https://www.mealtrain.com/articles/324-6-tips-for-delivering-your-meal

Flowers

What's not to love about flowers? The more colorful the better. The address is
2140 Santa Cruz Avenue # C204
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Karin Forssell Sep 24, 2023

Happiest at home



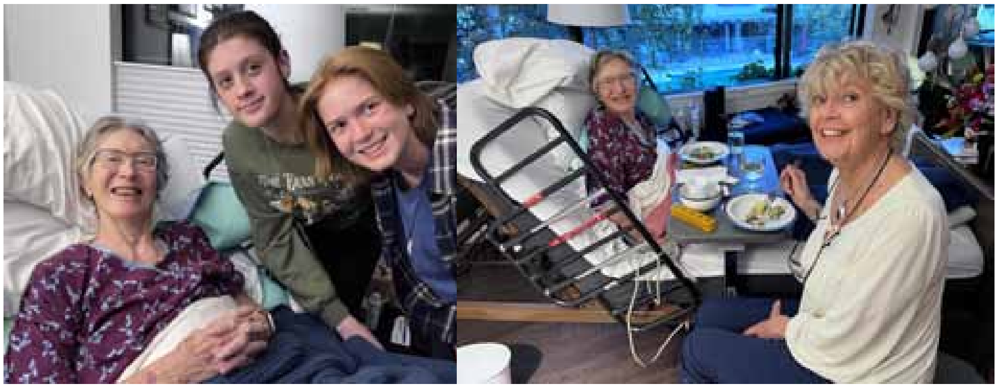
Today was a day of waiting and waiting and… finally! the transport showed up. (I think the two young men might have been on their first assignment ever, they look so young! But as Christine teased, quite handsome as well.)

Her bed is set up in the corner of the living room where she can see out the window, watch TV, or check out what everyone else is doing. Her forms are all filled out, her medications are prepped, and she has been getting to know the lovely young woman who is taking care of her tonight (sent by TheKey, https://thekey.com/).

It's a huge relief to have her at home.

Karin Forssell Sep 25, 2023

Our party girl



One of many advantages to being home is that it is easier to have visitors. This weekend, Nika came home from college for a short visit with Mormor (and bonus: cousin Siri). Christine's dear friend Liz stopped by today on the way to LA. Anna and Noah are also making plans to come soon.

Christine often gets tired after a few minutes, and she can be a bit confused when she first wakes up. But if her energy is good, she is quick to offer a little fika (cup of coffee and a cookie). The chat may be short, but there's a chance you will see her familiar spark.

If you're nearby and would like to visit, text my dad first (he's the one most likely to be around). Suggest a time that day or the next; it is too hard if you say "anytime" or ask him to get back to you. If he says no, please don't be offended. There are a lot of moving parts in our lives right now, and we can't have too many people coming any given day. Feel free to try again later.

And whether you are near or far, please send her a memory of your friendship. We are collecting videos all this week. Tap the link to get started recording a 60-second memory: https://app.memento.com/i/yo3vq6bjqy

Any little memory is welcome, such as how you met, something you learned from her, a meal you shared, or a time she made you happy. She will enjoy hearing from you!

Karin Forssell Sep 27, 2023
Excellent Elizabeth

Today I am grateful for Elizabeth.

The day Christine came home, Elizabeth made hersef available around the clock, Monday morning through Friday night. We are so fortunate!

She can adjust the pillows just so, get meds on time, figure out the Apple TV or the set top box (for dancing with the stars or background music), give a bed bath, arrange flowers, do massage, run a load of laundry, whip up a chicken apple salad, sew a seam, move Christine around in the bed (ergonomically—I've learned several tricks from her!)… the list goes on.

But the most important thing is that she pays attention to Christine. She doesn't need to be asked to do any of this. When the rest of us need to be at work or at home or just need a break, Elizabeth is there. My mother feels cared for and that is a blessing.

Karin Forssell Sep 30, 2023

In Christine's words

In the fall of 2021, neighbor Ingrid Rogers interviewed Christine, age 81, as part of a Practicum on "Aging Well." The following is an excerpt from Ingrid's transcript of "Christine's Story."

"Some of the results of Parkinsons are not that different from the results of aging in general, like the fact that I can't do what I used to be able to do. I love to cook, but now, after half an hour of standing in the kitchen, I get very tired. I miss the energy that I used to have. I used to love playing tennis, but I haven't done that in years.

There are also many things that make me happy though. Being able to live in this place at Menlo Commons is fantastic. I feel very fortunate to be close to our children and grandchildren too.

"I am not afraid of dying. We have talked to the kids quite a bit about what we want. I believe that when I die, I die and that's it.

…

"What I think is more important than thinking about funeral arrangements is to live in such a way that people remember you to be a positive and good and fun person to be with. I notice how much we in our family talk about my mother and Dag's. We want to be remembered like that. We want people to think that we were generous and giving-- that I was a pleasant and kind person."

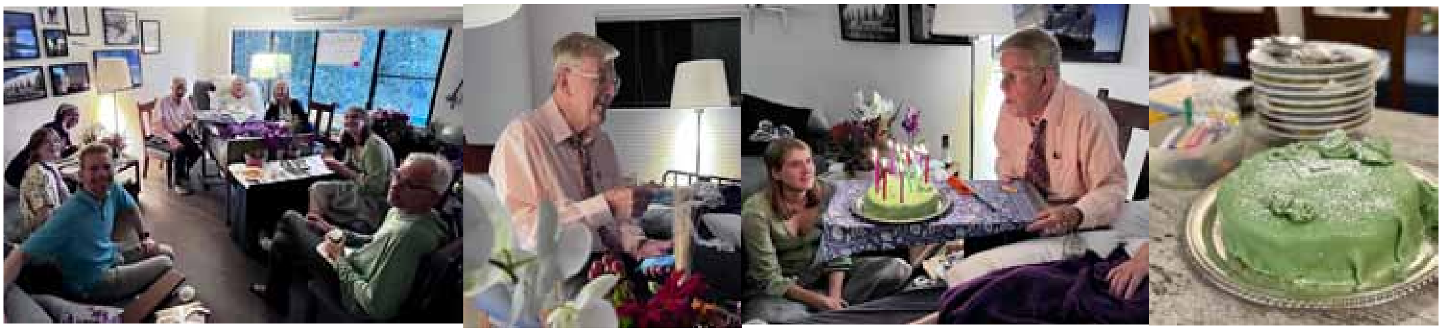
Karin Forssell Oct 1, 2023

Anna's here!

Christine is thrilled to have granddaughter Anna here this weekend. Anna pampered Mormor by baking her favorite treat, saffron buns, even though it's not Christmas! Yum!! Of course, beating able to chat was the biggest treat.

Karin Forssell Oct 2, 2023

Dag's birthday

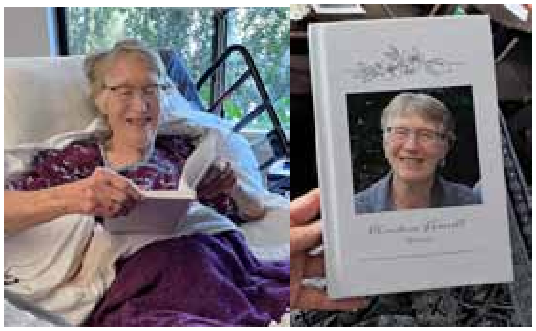


Despite, or maybe because of the fact that we don't have much time left with Christine, we are celebrating as much as we can.

Today is Dag's 83 birthday. We had a nice dinner and used the fine silver and china. Anna baked a princess cake. My cousin Björn, in town from Australia, joined the festivities. We enjoyed sitting in the living room, eating good food with lots of conversations.

Karin Forssell Oct 3, 2023

The Storyworth book arrived!



Almost two years ago, Christine started writing about her memories. I gave her a gift subscription to a service called Storyworth. I chose questions for Storyworth to send each week. Christine wrote an answer of anywhere from a paragraph to several pages.

After she finished 40 entries (we skipped some weeks), we looked it all over. She made some edits, I added some photos. The other day, the printed copy arrived. It's great fun reading it aloud to her and hearing her tell us more. What a treasure she made for all of us!

Here are a couple samples:

"What is your favorite memory of each of your siblings?"

"Whom did you date?"

PS I have a sharing code if you want a discount: https://www.storyworth.com/friend/karin-Forssell

Karin Forssell Oct 4, 2023

Sleeping more

Although I mostly post photos of Christine awake and smiling, the reality is that she is sleeping more and more. She's good for maybe ten minutes of conversation before she closes her eyes. But don't tell secrets around her, because she might still be listening! Even though she's too tired to talk, sometimes she'll answer questions with a thumbs up, a slight nod, or a frown.

She tends to raise her arms above her head while sleeping, in what looks like a posture of carefree abandon. I suspect it helps open her lungs. She moves around a little bit and enjoys occasionally lying on her side, which is good since we want to avoid bed sores. I'm a bit envious of the hospital bed that adjusts to all sorts of positions. She's very clear with us about what she wants in order to get comfortable.

I don't know how much longer we have with her. I'm glad that this phase is fairly peaceful.

Karin Forssell Oct 5, 2023

Soup's on!

I wrote earlier that Christine is on a "pleasure diet." For some, that means eating ice cream every day. For Christine, it is soup!

As she declines, swallowing is becoming more difficult. Drinking thin liquids can cause her to cough, so now we add a thickener to her water and coffee. She takes her medicines in applesauce. She does best with soft foods, and still enjoys cheese as a midnight snack. In fact, she likes to eat almost anytime, in small amounts. Soups are the perfect combination of flavor and texture.

She has enjoyed a variety soups ever since arriving at Stanford hospital. There, the choice was between cauliflower and tomato soup. Both were excellent. At The Terraces, she appreciated the corn chowder, creamy zucchini, and tomato soups. And at home, she has enjoyed several other flavors including a wonderful mushroom soup that Lisa made from scratch, this evening's clam chowder (thanks, Shieh family!), and… tomato soup.

Please think of her fondly next time you enjoy a bowl.

Karin Forssell Oct 6, 2023

Thoughts on saying goodbye

Noah came home from college today.

While I wasn't there with him and Christine this evening, I've been thinking a lot about how it is for our children, visiting their grandmother for what is probably the last time. I care a great deal about her experience, so I want them to let her take the lead. My bet is that she'll ask them about their lives at school and bring up fond memories from their childhoods. She has a lot of those.

But I also want to help them with this transition. There are a lot of different things they might feel moved to say or do. Reading through online articles, there's no one right way. The kids might feel a lot, or not so much, right now. Being close to her might make this transition easier, or harder, on them. It might sink in sooner, or later. That's OK.

However, there are a few last messages that repeat often in the advice blogs. These are the things we might regret not having said while we still could. They are powerful:

Forgive me / I forgive you,
thank you, and
I love you.

We're lucky that we're able to talk to Christine about how we feel, if we want to, and that she's able to hear and respond to what we tell her. Still, it strikes me that these messages are worth expressing anytime, all the time, to everyone. Isn't it better not to wait? So, thank you for being here. It means a lot to me, to know that you care for Christine. I love you.

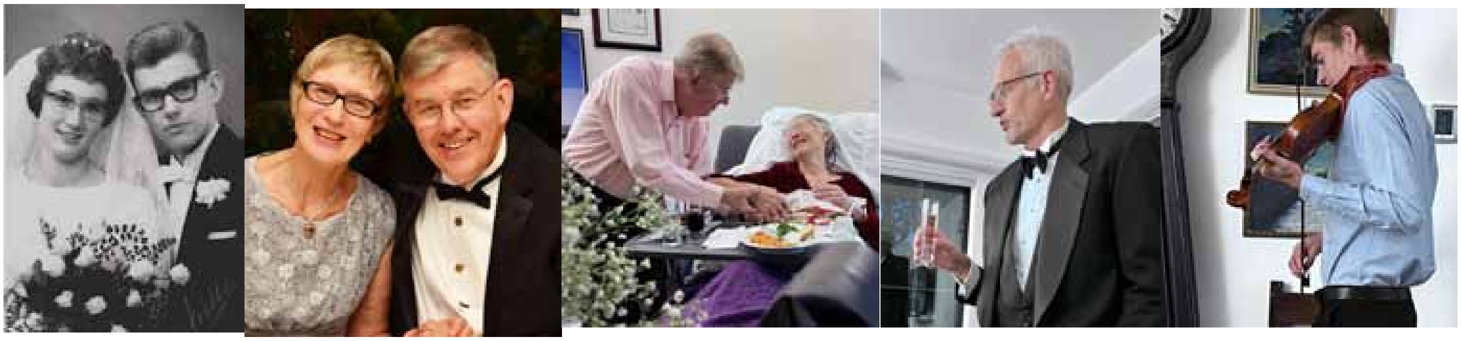
https://www.mjhs.org/resource/what-to-say-dying-loved-one/

https://www.crossroadshospice.com/hospice-palliative-care-blog/2018/october/17/five-essential-things-to-say-to-a-dying-person/

https://www.hrrv.org/blog/tips-from-a-hospice-nurse-what-to-say-to-a-dying-person/

Karin Forssell Oct 7, 2023

60th anniversary, observed



Christine and Dag were married on February 21, 1964. This week, Lisa and I decided to take advantage of Noah's visit to have an early anniversary party.

We have celebrated their anniversary as a family every year since I was about 10 years old. That year, Lisa and I felt that we should be allowed to participate in the fancy dinner. Rather than go out to a restaurant, my parents stayed home, where we orchestrated the fanciest dinner we could think of. I'm pretty sure we gave my mother a shopping list and asked my dad to grill steaks. We likely set a fancy table and told them to drink wine. I know for sure we drew our own fancy menus.

Over the years, celebrating their anniversary has become a favorite tradition. The food got fancier as Lisa and I got better at cooking. Some attempts were less successful, as in the year of the uncooked mashed potatoes. Others were much better, like the year we made baked Alaska. There was a surprise party for their 20th and a weekend getaway for their 30th.

This evening we appreciated the tasty dinner "catered" by Chez Landay. For dessert we had vanilla ice cream with warm raspberry sauce—a repeat of the original wedding feast. We looked at the photo albums from 1964 and 2014 and even brought out the silver crown Christine wore at the wedding. There were toasts and stories and fancy clothes. As an extra treat, Noah serenaded us all on the violin.

We would have loved to make it to the real anniversary. Still, these are sweet memories.

Karin Forssell Oct 8, 2023

Christines tacktal Christne's toast

In the tradition of fancy parties, Christine gave a speech last night. Here it comes in the original Swedish, followed by a translation.

Kära Morfar! Jag ville hålla tal först den här gången. Jag tycker att vi behöver inte ta upp den där storyn om hur vi möttes. [K: För den kan vi allihopa*.] Ja.

Jag skulle bara tacka dig för det roligt vi haft alla åren. Som du vet, det har gått lite upp och lite ner. Men mest uppåt.

[skrattar] Du är faktiskt en rolig människa att bo ihop med. Alltså nu är det ju grejer som händer, men det är suveränt som du tar och… konstruerar så mycket. Det är alltid spännande. Att det skulle gå så här, [löjligt?]… Att leva med dig är faktiskt lite kul här och där.

Tyvärr slutar det så här, och det är dumt! [hostar] Så är det, säger du. Ja. Jag kunde inte ha en bättre som sköter om mig. Men så är det nu.

Morfar är ett bra föredöme för det. [Pekar på oss alla. Skratt. K: We will try our best to be just like him.] Okej. [nickar] Det är bra. Det är bra. För jag har det mycket bra. Så, så är det. Tack ska du ha.

[pussar]

Applåd! [skratt och applåd]

English (over)

Translation:

Dear Morfar! I wanted to speak first this time. I don't think we need to bring up that story about how we met. [K: because we all know it*.] Yes.

I just wanted to thank you for the fun we've had all these years. As you know, it's been a little up and a little down. But mostly up.

[laughs] You're actually a fun person to live with. Well, things are happening now… but it's wonderful that you design and build so much. It's always exciting.

That it would go like this, [stupidly]... Living with you is quite a bit of fun now and then.

It's unfortunate that it ends like this, so dumb! [coughs] That's how it is, you say. Yes. I couldn't have anyone better to take care of me. But that's how it is now.

Morfar sets a good example for you all. [Points to all of us. Laugh. K: We will try our best to be just like him.] Okay. [nods] That's good. It is good. Because I'm doing very well. So, that's how it is. [to Dag] Thank you.

[kiss]

Applause, please! [laughter and clapping]

* Innan talet sa Mormor: Om jag tappar ord hjälp mig med en gång!

* Before the speech, Christine told us: if I forget a word, help me out right away!

Karin Forssell Oct 9, 2023

Dag's toast

After Christine gave her speech, Dag took a turn. Here's what he said.

You didn't want to talk about how we met, but the fact of the matter is that I am a very, very lucky guy.

I was so lucky, I was so fortunate, that the girl that I thought was my first girlfriend, jilted me. And when she did, I had your address. Not your phone number, but I knew how to get to your summer house.

You became my friend. We discussed everything. Our friendship blossomed while I was in the military service. We learned to trust each other. We understood each other. That friendship has lasted, and it's still here. We've been telling everyone who wants to know, asking us what's the secret to a happy marriage, we tell them friendship. And resolve conflict. Love is the frosting on the cake, and we have it in spades.

I am so lucky to have lived with you, a wonderful life. And we are lucky together to have such wonderful family, that takes good care of us now. [C: Yes.] We're not alone, quite the opposite. We are so fortunate as to live in what amounts to a multi generational family, which is the best kind.

I'm happy to celebrate with you.

I think I get to kiss you one more time!

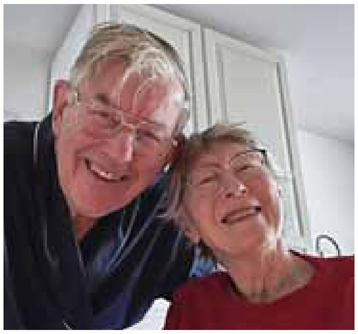
Karin Forssell Oct 10, 2023

Still with us

Still eating, tiny portions.
Still talking, very slowly.
Still listening, eyes resting.
Still loving your messages.
Still laughing at memories.
Still comfortable.
Still.

Karin Forssell Oct 11, 2023

One month



Just over a month ago, Christine was in a wheelchair singing me awake on my birthday. Later that morning we interviewed Elizabeth about coming a few days a week to help out. In the afternoon, she had a doctor's appointment to talk about her pain, sweating, coughing, and weakness. From there, we went to the emergency room for tests. That night, with quiet beeping in the background, the attending physician told us that the CT scan showed nodules in her liver, spine, and lungs. Since then, she has not been out of bed. Yesterday, the hospice nurse estimated maybe a couple more weeks.

Such a lot can happen in a short time. It's been a scramble to adjust and figure out next steps as first we learned about the cancer, then we realized that it was too late to treat it. We've had a wild ride between hope and acceptance and upset and sorrow.

I'm glad we've finally gotten her comfortable and pain free. Selfishly, I'm also glad we have this time to let her know how much she means to us. She can't talk much but can hear just fine, and understands what we say. She knows she is loved.

Karin Forssell Oct 13, 2023

Breathing

They tell us that the hospice nurse will be able to tell when the end is approaching by the way Christine breathes.

So far as I know we're not quite there yet, but it's easy to hear that it's harder for her to get enough air. She's got a little wheeze behind her snores. This evening, she received an oxygen pump. It won't extend her life, but it will make her more comfortable.

It plugs into the wall. It includes a humidifier (to keep her nose from drying out) that bubbles like some alchemist's brew. The whole machine is rather loud. True to form, Dag figured out how to connect the extension tube to put the noise outside. Gotta love that can-do spirit.

Karin Forssell Oct 15, 2023

The plan

About a week before going to the hospital, Christine told me over lunch that this — Parkinson's, being in a wheelchair, being dependent on Dag for everything — was not "the plan." The plan, she explained when I asked, was to stay healthy and active to a high age, and then for the two of them to die together in their sleep. (To be honest, I think that would have been a great shock to the rest of us. But it is a sweet sentiment.)

I imagine all of us have ideas about our final chapter. Nobody wants pain, or dementia, or to be a burden on those we love. But we very seldom get to choose.

For those who are curious, California does have an End of Life Option Act. It includes a great many safeguards to prevent abuse. The adult patient with a diagnosis of a terminal illness must ask for aid-in-dying drugs. The hospice personnel will never bring it up, but they can provide support. The patient must be able to communicate their wishes clearly to two different doctors, at least 48 hours apart. The patient must self-administer the drugs (a sizable cocktail) and of course, can choose not to follow through. Family members cannot assist.

Christine is still eating a small bowl of soup several times a day, now spoon fed. She's awake a couple hours a day. (We think. It's a little hard to tell.) It's becoming increasingly difficult to understand what she's saying, although on occasion she can make her wishes very clear. (Especially when she wants Dag to come!) She still smiles when we talk to her about fond memories, eyes closed. It may not be "the plan," but at least she is not suffering.

Karin Forssell Oct 17, 2023

Last night

Last night we were all there, near Christine. We had dinner and took turns sitting with her, talking or just holding her hand. She sometimes seemed to sense us, but mostly she was sleeping. Lisa and Hugh looked through her wedding album and read the thank you notes aloud to her. Siri gave her a big hug. As I left, I sang her a lullaby that she sang to us as children.

Last night was Christine's last. She passed peacefully in the early hours of Tuesday morning.

Videvisan

Sof, du lilla videung; än så är det vinter.
Än så sofva björk och ljung, ros och hyacinther.
Än så är det långt till vår,
Innan rönn i blomma står.
Sof, du lilla videung, än så är det vinter.

Solskensöga ser på dig; solskens famn dig vaggar.
Snart blir grönt på skogens stig, snart hvar blomma flaggar.
Än en liten solskensbön:
Vide liten blir så grön.
Solskensöga ser på dig; solskens famn dig vaggar.

Translation at https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sov_du_lilla_vide_ung

Karin Forssell Oct 21, 2023

Memorial to be determined

Dag, Lisa, and I are grateful for all the messages from friends and family members. We feel blessed to have such a supportive community.

Some have asked about a funeral. We won't organize anything immediately. Christine chose to be cremated, so we have some time to explore options and make plans for a memorial.

Karin Forssell Nov 15, 2023

After

It's been almost a month since Christine passed. At least once a day, something comes up that I wish I could talk to her about.

I (we?) have been needing a lot of downtime. It's understandable, though inconvenient. First, there was a lot to navigate with her decline, from hospital to hospice. There were so many questions to answer! There were new systems to learn, options to explore, decisions to make. All while coming to terms emotionally with the fact that she was dying.

After she passed, there have been more emotions and other questions, big and small. Among them, "How and when do we organize a gathering to remember her?" She wanted us to have "a party for friends with toasts." We've now made a plan to gather on December 19, after her grandchildren are back from college. The event will be in Sveadal (sveadal.org), which holds special memories of time spent with her. There will also be an event to bury her ashes in Sweden next year.

We will continue to navigate many questions for quite some time. Who will notify the bank? What do we do with her eye glasses? Where did she keep that file, or this key? When we gather for family dinners, how do we include her in our conversations? Each of us is figuring out the answers in our own way, slowly discovering what "after" looks like.

Karin Forssell Apr 17, 2024

6 months later

> "There are three deaths: the first is when the body ceases to function. The second is when the body is consigned to the grave. The third is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time."
> -- Neuroscientist and science fiction author David Eagleman

It's been six months since Christine breathed her last, on October 17.

We are slowly getting used to the new normal. She's with us in spirit when we gather for a family dinner, celebrate holidays, or talk with old friends. I think of her when I wear my new glasses (she would have noticed!) or travel (she always wanted to hear everything!). I feel she is with me when I cook or bake from one of her recipes. We missed her at Christmas and when we ate Fat Tuesday buns. We will miss her at Siri's promotion from 8th grade in May.

It's been a journey. Looking back, I slept a lot the first few weeks. I also had a lot of catching up to do at work. There were so many, many decisions to make. I am grateful to have Lisa as a partner as we tag-teamed the tasks. Where to host the luncheon for celebrating her life? When to bury her ashes? What to do with her clothes, shoes, glasses? How will we mark the important dates in her life? The holidays came and went and we managed to keep going.

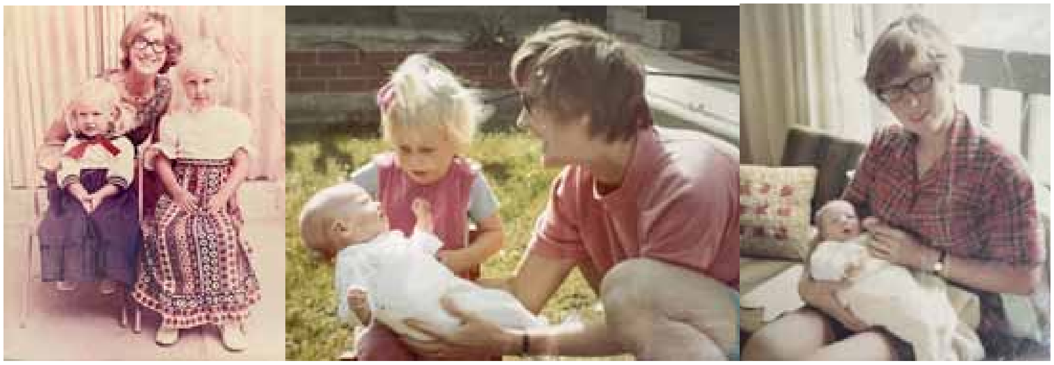
On June 7, we will bury Christine's ashes in Sweden. Yesterday, Dag left for Europe. He'll be visiting for the next two months. The rest of us will arrive in Sweden at the beginning of June. We will take leave of her in an old churchyard and tell stories about her over lunch. We look forward to reconnecting with her family and some old friends.

It will be good to share memories of her with all those who loved her for a long time to come.

PS If you are in Sweden and want details for the ceremony, email me.

Karin Forssell May 12, 2024

Mothers' Day



Today is Mothers' Day in the United States.
My niece Anna shared this poem, which feels especially relevant.

ON THOSE DAYS Donna Ashworth

On those days,
when you miss someone the most,

as though your memories,
are sharp enough,
to slice through skin and bone,

remember how they loved you.

Remember how they loved you,
and do that,
for yourself.

In their name,
in their honour.

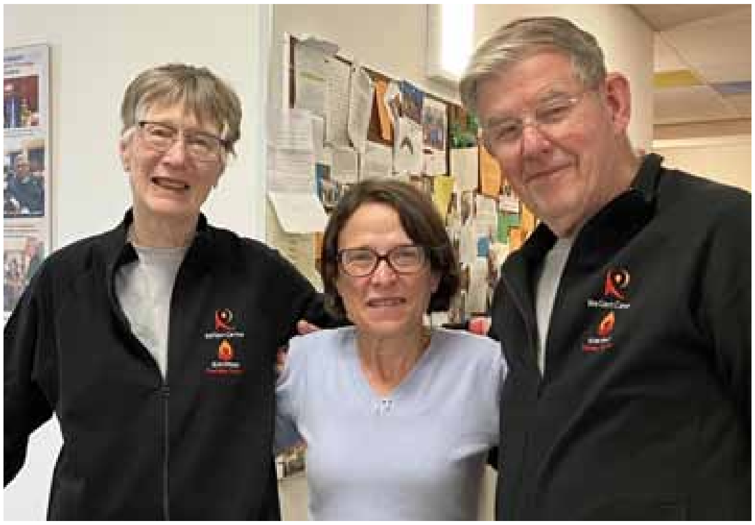
Love yourself,
as they loved you.

They would like that.

On those days when you miss someone the most,
love yourself harder.

Karin Forssell May 17, 2024

May 17



May 17 will always be my mother's birthday. She was big on celebrations in general, and she loved any excuse for a party.

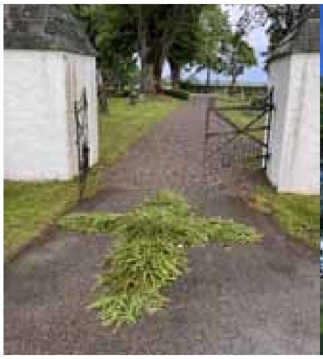
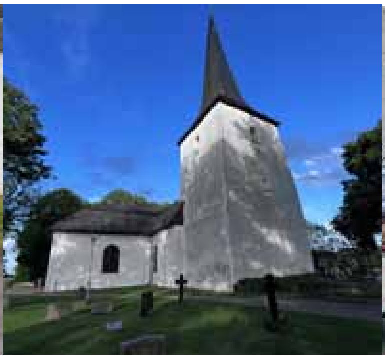
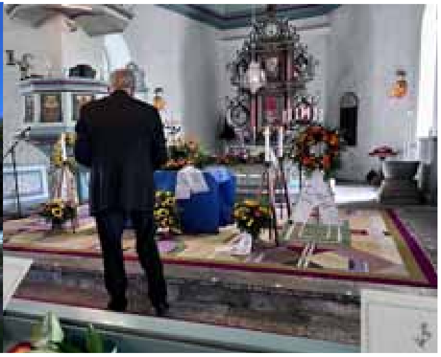
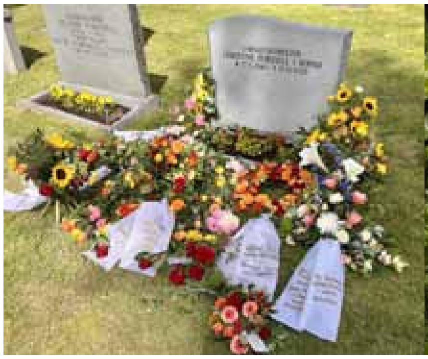
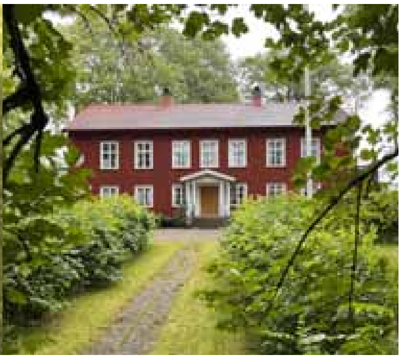
We had planned to have a big big celebration for her 80th birthday, in 2020. Unfortunately, the pandemic disrupted those plans. Instead, she enjoyed calls and cards from all sorts of friends in honor of the day. Reminiscing, she said that it was every bit as good.

A year ago today, she was in Italy visiting the European Parkinson's Therapy Center. I emailed them and let me know about the occasion. They made her feel very special with flowers and a homemade cake. She was thrilled.

I hope you'll join me in appreciating her life today, in whatever way makes sense to you.

Karin Forssell Jun 9, 2024

At rest.

Christine’s ashes were buried at Bolstad church in Dalsland, Sweden on June 7. After a beautiful ceremony full of song, we shared memories and connected with family members over lunch.

In many ways it was a time of contrasts… feeling close despite distance, celebrating life and mourning death, mingling tears and laughter throughout the day.

It felt very special and yet, also just as it should be.

Karin Forssell Oct 17, 2024

Today, it's been one year.

I find myself remembering Christine as she was in earlier years. Sunday mornings, breakfast in bed. At the beach in Lake Arrowhead. Baking cookies at Christmas. Quizzing me on spelling words. Taking long walks in the woods.

Please join me in sharing a memory, if you'd like.