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Coming full circle after long-ago meeting with the Zinns

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Howard and Roslyn Zinn

By **Bryan Marquard**, **Globe Staff**

When you move from state to state as often as I do, life doubles back in unanticipated ways. Nearly 30 years ago, when I met Howard and Roslyn Zinn, it goes without saying that none of us could imagine that someday I would write her obituary and contribute to his.

We didn't meet at one of the protest marches where the Zinns participated in history, or in a Boston University classroom where Howard taught the subject. Our first encounter was in front of a hillside house in Hartland, Vt., that was home to the muckraking journalist George Seldes, then in his 90s.

A car pulled up and Howard unfolded his lanky frame from the driver's side. Out the other

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door stepped Roslyn. Her smile enchanted. His famously wide grin seemed to stretch from Vermont's Green Mountains to New Hampshire's Presidential Range.

I was almost two years into my first newspaper job and a fledgling coproducer of "You Can't Print That," a television documentary on Seldes' life and career. My producing partner, Robert Gershon, was a professor at Castleton State College in Vermont. Bob had the television background and academic credentials to secure grant money for the project, and he was worldly enough (I certainly wasn't) to know it would be great to videotape Howard having a conversation with Seldes.

Howard Zinn admired Seldes' work in the way many now treasure Zinn's own books, and he readily traveled north from his home in Newton to the aging brick house on a steep dirt road in rural Vermont.

We taped their conversation inside the house and went outside to record Howard talking about the impact of Seldes' work. Then the Zinns left.

A quarter century or so passed before Howard and I spoke again, when I wrote [Roslyn's obituary](#) nearly two years ago. Last week, I contributed to [Howard's obit](#). As I wrote about each, I revisited that early 1980s morning when they arrived in Vermont, and wished I could reach back to offer the younger me some advice: Remember every detail, you'll write about them someday.

Would I have listened to the whispers of my middle-aged self? Probably not. As an inexperienced reporter at the Rutland Herald -- my hometown paper in Vermont -- I would have found the prospect of someday working at the Globe even more farfetched than the suggestion that I would write the obituaries of this charming couple.

Several lifetimes separate that afternoon from today. I've lived at 32 addresses in eight states during my 52 years, and I moved 16 times between waving goodbye to the Zinns and calling Howard after his wife died. (Family life planted the seeds of rootlessness: My father, a chain store manager, was transferred often, so I racked up seven addresses and four states before graduating from high school.)

In 2008, I pulled up in front of Howard's house to drop off a book of his wife's paintings and some photographs of her that I borrowed. He invited me inside and wanted to continue the conversation that began as an obituary interview about her life.

That's not unusual. I can't claim to have been friends with Howard, but an uncommon intimacy attends an interview about a loved one who has just died, and many people want to hold onto that closeness after the obituary appears. Howard's wife died of cancer and my wife has multiple sclerosis, so we sat in his living room discussing the experience of being married to spouses with serious illnesses.

Since that afternoon, we only spoke once more, for an obituary about one of his Boston University colleagues. During that call we talked about possibly meeting for a lunch we never got around to scheduling, so we could converse again outside the constraints of an interview before time ushered either of us onto the obituary page.

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