

## A reunion story: Together again over a meal

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There was the time when she was 14 that then-Bonnie Mowry was called out of class and down to the Analy High nursing office, where she found herself in the sudden, joyful embrace of school nurse Della Miller.

Nearly 50 years later, they met again this week, this time by mutual design, a long-coming reunion that had them both in tears between laughter and hugs.

"I wanted to meet Della (again), but I didn't know where she was," said Braren, now a nurse herself who credits her career decision in part to the young nurse who fought to keep her alive as a premature baby in 1948.

Meeting at Miller's rural Sebastopol home Tuesday, it was clear a warm and loving bond remained as they caught up, sharing stories of their lives and photos of their families.

Until she saw a newspaper photo of Miller two weeks earlier, Braren hadn't even been sure the 87-year-old woman pictured there was still alive, she said.

But as soon as she saw Miller's name, she knew it had to be the same person who had cared for her as an infant.

And Miller immediately remembered the baby she'd help nurse to health during her days at Palm Drive Hospital, recalling, "I gave a lot of special attention to her."

Born about two months prematurely with a twin, Brenda, who survived just two days, Braren was a mere 4.4 pounds at birth and soon began losing weight.

But no one could get her to take a bottle except Miller, a young nurse who made it her job to ensure this one baby girl survived.



*BETH SCHLANKER PHOTOS/THE PRESS DEMOCRAT*  
Della Miller, left, reunites with Bonnie Braren at Miller's home in Sebastopol, Tuesday. Miller, working as a nurse, helped to care for Braren after she was born 2 months premature in 1948.

Married but still without her own children, Miller lived close enough to Palm Drive that she could be available to a hungry newborn almost round-the-clock.

She could feed the infant each morning and afternoon, give her another bottle just before she left for the day, come back around 6 p.m. and then around 11 p.m., and then again at 3 a.m. before starting her shift the next morning.

“I would remember that Brenda didn't make it, and of course that's when I knew that this Bonnie had to make it,” Miller said.

Braren was hospitalized for about five weeks before she was permitted to go home. Her own mother, Ruth Mowry, mostly stayed home in west Sonoma County's Guerneville with two older children during that time and didn't drive, so she could only visit the nursery when her husband could bring her.

Ruth Mowry was never able to talk about the birth of her twins without crying, spoke little about it during her life. She never mentioned Miller, though the nurse's signature appears on the first page of Braren's baby book.

But when Miller and Braren both arrived at Analy High in 1962, before Miller moved over to the newly built El Molino High campus, Miller recognized her name as that of the baby whose survival once was unsure.

When she called her to the office and verified it was the same Bonnie, she embraced her, saying, “Bonnie, Oh my dear Bonnie!” Braren recalled.

She described how Braren would smack her lips and kick her legs when she heard the nurse's voice and knew she was coming with a bottle.

“I was so happy,” Miller said Tuesday of seeing that baby grown into a teen, “because she looked so good and so healthy, and mentally alert” despite the risks of her premature birth.

The two laughed over a baby portrait Braren brought to the reunion this week.

“I look kind of chunky there, don't I?” Braren joked.

She also shared several poems her mother had written about her two babies — the one she had longed to hold just once, the one she hoped God would guide “and keep...in his care.”

Most importantly, Braren came with lunch to share with the woman who once sustained her, with whom she hopes now to have an ongoing friendship with many visits yet to come.

“I just thought, ‘How perfect to be able to feed her,’” she said.

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