



Norway

Wednesday-Saturday, 11-14 October 2017

A close-up photograph of a woman with light brown hair, looking upwards and to the right. She is wearing a dark jacket. The background is dark with out-of-focus warm lights, suggesting an evening setting. The text 'WARM FRIENDS in COLD PLACES' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

WARM FRIENDS in COLD PLACES

Eli Beate Presthus Nilsen in the soft glow of a candlelit dinner of reindeer – not Rudolph – and salmon on Bergen's Bryggen, its 500-year-old wharf and UNESCO World Heritage Site.



WARM FRIENDS in COLD PLACES

On a hike with Hanne Elisabeth Hovden. She scored the winning goal in the final minute against Scotland County High in her last high school soccer match in North Carolina in 2004.

Daniel, Eli's boyfriend, and Eli with Emily and her new umbrella at the top of Fløyen, a mountain above Bergen. Just a few minutes after our reaching the top, the rain that had fallen all day ceased and out over the Atlantic, the setting sun broken through (next page). Bergen is a very rainy city because it's where the Gulf Stream comes to die. After the warm ocean current from the Gulf of Mexico sweeps up the U.S. East Coast, it crosses the Atlantic to collide head-on with the tall granite face of the fjord-laced Norwegian coast at a latitude even with Anchorage, Alaska. The Gulf Stream keeps Bergen relatively warm for its latitude. But climbing over Norway's mountains forces it to drop its moisture as rain on the coast and snow higher up.





Emily and I above Bergen.

WARM FRIENDS in COLD PLACES

I met Hanne and Eli when my mother was dying.

In early fall 2003, I was back east and went to Momma's room at Moore County Hospital in Pinehurst, N.C. The late Rev. Shirley Hutchins, who then was pastor at First Presbyterian in Hamlet, where I was born and grew up, was already there.

A teen-age girl was with her, Hanne Elisabeth Hovden, from Akershus near Oslo in Norway. Hanne was an exchange student at Richmond Senior High – the school that absorbed my high school – and was living with Shirley that year.

I was impressed a girl I thought would be interested in exploring as much as she could of the strange new place where she was living would instead be spending a weekend accompanying a clergywoman on her rounds visiting sick parishioners.

It turned out we had a lot in common. I had come to love Norway during the three February weeks I was there in 1994 covering the Winter Olympics in Lillehammer. Hanne said she would be playing for the Raiders' girls soccer team that year and the professional women's soccer team I was working for at the time, the San Jose CyberRays, had just wrapped up what would be our third and final season in the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA).

How did she pick Hamlet?

She hadn't. Hamlet – more precisely, Bennie Howard, Richmond's soccer coach – had picked her.

Hanne had listed several states on her application where she'd like to spend her senior year, mostly based on the soccer recommendations of Hege Riise, with whom she corresponded about her decision.

Riise, Norway's all-time best female soccer player, whom I had covered at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and who played for the Carolina Courage (Cary) in the WUSA, recommended North Carolina because many of the U.S. players had played for UNC.

Howard wanted good soccer players. Bingo.

Later that fall I was back for another visit and met Hanne at the Seaboard Festival, which celebrates my town's time as hub of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad. She was with Richmond's other Norwegian exchange, Eli Beate Presthus Nilsen.

Eli, who was from Bergen and lived with a woman in Rockingham that year, also played soccer. The CyberRays and WUSA had folded by then, and I gave Hanne and Eli some left over team jerseys.

They graduated in 2004, not in caps and gowns but in their bunads – traditional Norwegian folk costumes worn by men and women for special occasions like Christmas, weddings and the 17th of May, Constitution Day. Bunads represent the region of Norway you're from, and girls who can afford them usually get one about 15 years old.

Over the years we stayed in touch intermittently. When I wrote my novel, Eli and Hanne were invaluable research resources.

Eli studied at the University of Bergen with a period as an exchange student at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. Today she is a legal adviser with the Church of Norway, a Lutheran church, in Bergen.

Hanne attended the University of Oslo and spent an exchange year in Germany for her masters in political science. Because the German university required that papers be written in English, she thought of me as an editor for her thesis.

Today she lives in Hønefoss and teaches politics and German at Hadeland videregående skole – Hadeland High School – in the town of Gran, which is in Oppland where Lillehammer is.

Tusen takk to Eli and Hanne for their friendship and warm hospitality in their kingdom.



Bergen's Bryggen is the location of centuries-old wooden warehouses that are remnants of the city's membership in the Hanseatic League, a trading association among cities along the Baltic and North Sea coasts. Bergen fishermen caught, dried and sold cod from these warehouses and built the city into a prosperous community. The restaurant where we dined with Eli and Daniel was in one of these buildings – which remind me of Winterfell from the TV series "Game of Thrones" – that was 300 years old and had a sloping stone floor. Today, the Bryggen's warehouses are filled with shops, restaurants and a historical museum.



On our day with Hanne, she took us to Hadeland videregående skole, where she teaches, for lunch in the cafeteria and then to Lillehammer so I could revisit some of my Olympic memories. This is her school office.



Gordon stands atop the wall at Akershus Castle overlooking the harbor in Oslo. Built at least 700 years ago, the castle was the home of Norwegian kings, a fortress to protect the city and a prison during the German occupation of Norway in World War II. On the right edge of this shot are two rectangular brick towers, Oslo City Hall, where the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony is held each year.