

Gloria Duffy

MUTUAL FUN

The envelope was stamped TOP SECRET in big red letters, and inside, the invitation admonished, “The secret depends on YOU!” Obediently, we told no one about the November Surprise.

A quick flight to Washington, D.C., a hunt on Connecticut Avenue to replace a forgotten set of studs and cufflinks, and into our formal attire. Our friend Janne Nolan picked us up at the hotel and off the three of us went to the British Embassy, to the residence of Sir David Manning and Lady Catherine Manning (aka British crime novelist Elizabeth Ironside).

We were told to arrive an hour before the guest of honor, and the Mannings shepherded us upstairs in their elegant stone home, where we drank champagne and were happy to see people we knew, including former Secretary of State George Shultz and California and San Francisco Chief Protocol Charlotte Shultz, former National Security Advisor Sandy Berger and Stanford professor Steve Krasner. We saw many people we knew slightly or knew of – Vernon Jordan, pro football manager Carmen Policy, Laura Bush, Colin Powell, White House Chief of Staff Andy Card, Agriculture Secretary Ann Venemen.

Just before 8 p.m., the Mannings asked for our attention and then arrayed us, a lineup of black ties, gowns and champagne flutes, on the two curved staircases leading upstairs from the foyer of their house. We were shushed, and told to sing “Happy Birthday” as soon as the guest of honor arrived. From where I stood, midway up the right-hand staircase, I could see Condi’s black SUV pull up next to the open door, and out she popped, looking trim and focused as always, in a pair of slacks and a sweater. As a ruse to get her to the scene of the party, she had been invited to go to a local cafe for an informal 50th birthday dinner with the Mannings and members of her family.

We chorused “Happy Birthday,” and Condi looked up both staircases with



Gloria Duffy and Condoleezza Rice and Janne Nolan

astonishment. She began to recognize individual people, from various parts of her life and around the country, greeting and hugging people and expressing amazement to see us there. Soon she was whisked into an elevator and taken upstairs where a gown Oscar de la Renta had designed especially for her was waiting. She emerged 20 minutes later, resplendent in the crimson gown, with her hair done up.

Dinner was served, toasts were made to Condi and by her to President Bush, who slipped in during dinner. Van Cliburn played embellished versions of “God Save the Queen” and “The Star Spangled Banner” on the piano. Condi said, “Since I know you are such a big fan of classical music in the White House –” The president interrupted, “Yeah, right!!” Condi continued, “– I thought we should ask Van to play something classical on the piano.”

Candles in the shape of goal posts (atop a cake decorated as a gridiron, a nod to Condi’s love of pro football) were blown out. Then the door of the next room burst open and the sounds of Motown and classic rock ’n’ roll flowed out from the live band. We danced until midnight.

The many surprises of the evening delighted all the guests, and pleased Condi as the birthday honoree. But the biggest surprise for me was that what I expected to happen, didn’t. Over the past year, we have heard lots of partisan bickering and divisions over values among the American people. Gay rights, views on the Iraq war and religion are all issues that ostensibly deeply divide the American people. As one who served in a Democratic administra-

tion and campaigned for John Kerry, I expected the atmosphere in Washington to have a slight chill, 10 days after President Bush was re-elected with his much-vaunted mandate. As one friend said when considering whether to attend the party, “They will be insufferable!” Not that it would particularly bother me, with my family’s 140-year history in the Republican Party, but

I expected the Bush officials to be jubilant in their triumph, at a minimum toasting to victory and another four years.

But not so. I have rarely, especially in Washington, seen such an amiably diverse and bipartisan crowd. There were football players and politicians, business people and classical musicians, black folks and white folks, Republicans and Democrats, the religious and the firmly secular, gay people such as Van Cliburn and straight people. Not a comment was uttered to make the Democrats present feel excluded; the tone of the evening was comfortable bipartisan celebration. If a values divide simmered below the surface, it was certainly invisible. Our common goal was to honor and celebrate someone whom people with various attitudes and affiliations call their friend.

As we left the party, I cast a backward glance at the dance floor, where a few stalwarts, including Condi, were still twirling. Noting the band’s name, I thought to myself, let that concept, “Mutual Fun,” be a harbinger for the year ahead. Let Democrats and Republicans, people of all faiths and orientations, work together, spanning their differences for the common good. Let the partisans in Congress and in our state Legislature in California be guided by underlying shared values and a spirit of cooperation. There are so many goals on which, with a spirit as accepting and positive as was in the room that November night, we could all collaborate and solve some of the urgent problems that face us in 2005. Ω

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