 Variety is the Spice of Life

John Doe thrives from frequent changes of pace and scenery.

Maybe it’s true that you can’t have it all, but John Doe has had a lot. There was the childhood of global addresses as his father’s banking career deposited the family in some of the world’s most inspiring cities. Next came college and military service, two seemingly different experiences that John came to value as surprisingly similar sources of growth as he entered young adulthood.

Then there’s professional life—the corporate and the entrepreneurial—but most important to John are the lifelong romance he has enjoyed with his wife Sue, whom he calls “my better nine-tenths,” and the five children who remain the light of John’s life. Just as they once brought laughter into his home, now they stop by with spouses, kids and pets to make more happy memories and lots of noise, just the way John likes it.

THE “ODD YEARS”

In 1948 when Jim and Ellie Doe settled into their first home just outside of New York City, they believed that house would take them, at minimum, through the school years of their toddler daughter Jane and newborn son John. But as soon as Jim got into banking, his star rose.
He was still in his 20s when he was offered the opportunity to head up a branch in London, so he moved his young family to England for a short time until he was tapped to open another branch, this time in Madrid. That move would not be the last. By the time John and his sister were in their teens, they’d attended American schools on three continents—Europe, Asia and Africa. As a little boy John used to ask his parents, “Is this an even year or an odd year? Because I know on the odd years we always move somewhere new.”

Each relocation felt like an adventure to John, who became adept at making new friends and picking up the language, sports, music and customs of every new residence. John was 16 when nomadic life came to an end as his dad was named a vice president of the bank and transferred back to New York City. Spending his junior and senior years at Edison High School in suburban New Jersey, John went through a reverse culture shock as a stranger in his own country. He’d been back for visits to see grandparents and cousins, but he’d never had a sense of “home.”

While staying put lacked the excitement of constant travel, John liked knowing that he wouldn’t be changing schools again. He joined the baseball team, playing first base with much success and became involved in several school clubs, including the
Italian and the Japanese Club, where members were encouraged to speak only in the subject language. Having lived in both Rome and Tokyo, John welcomed the chance to keep up his foreign language skills.

**STUDENT, SAILOR, SWEET-TALKER**

After graduation, while friends ventured to the west coast for college or abroad to explore the world, John enrolled in New York City’s own Queens College, majoring in accounting and general business and rounding out his education with an ample supply of courses in literature, history and science, mostly physics. Placing out of the mandatory foreign language requirement didn’t stop John from including classes in language as either a refresher course to shore up a language he knew or an introductory course to a language he didn’t yet speak.

Although he typically went home on Sundays to have dinner with his parents, John wanted to live on his own. He found a part-time job at a hardware store to finance his half of the rent for an apartment that he took with Frank Smith, a buddy from high school who also was attending Queens College.

“We didn’t know each other well when we started rooming together,” Frank recalls, “but we got to be fast friends. John always had people coming over—guys for a pickup game at the basketball hoop at a school down the street, and on weekends we’d have parties with girls, always lots of pretty girls. I don’t know how he met them, but it was great for me to have an outgoing roommate like John. He was smart, too. John’s grades were good. I’d ask him to quiz me before my Spanish tests and look over my history papers, and he was always nice and helped me out.”

While at college, John lived on the second floor of this brownstone in Queens.

When the Vietnam War led to a draft lottery, John’s birthday pulled a low number, making him likely to have been drafted had it not been for his four-year college deferment. When he received his accounting degree, the deferment ran out and within a few weeks after graduation
John was classified as 1-A, available for service. That summer, he decided to enlist.

“We all thought that by the time we got out of school the war would be finished, but Vietnam was still going on,” John recalls. “Some guys moved to Canada, some filed for conscientious objector status and a few of my friends got medical deferments. But I always said that if I got called, I’d go. So about a month after college, instead of waiting to be drafted I just enlisted. That way I could choose a branch of service and have more control over my military career path. I thought being on a boat would be cool, so I joined the Navy and became a sailor!”

John was sent to Great Lakes Naval Base north of Chicago, where he trained for eight weeks. “It was so beautiful up there, and then we’d all go down to the big city on weekends,” John remembers. “I kind of fell in love with Chicago and the Midwest. Everyone used to say Midwestern people were the friendliest, and I found that to be very true.”

By the end of that summer, John learned that he was to be deployed to Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. Greek was one language he hadn’t learned when he lived abroad, and he looked forward to adding it to his repertoire. The night before they were to leave Great Lakes, John and his Navy friends went down to their favorite watering hole just off Chicago’s famous Magnificent Mile. When a young woman named Sue Carter sat next him, John knew this would turn into a night that he would never forget.

“Back then we didn’t have Facebook or Match.com, so we had to meet women the old-fashioned way—at a bar,” John jokes. “When Sue took that bar stool on my left, my heart stopped and even my drinking stopped. I was already drunk on love. The problem was that I was leaving the next day.”

Sue remembers the initial attraction as a bit less dramatic. “I’d just gotten off work and was supposed to meet some girlfriends for dinner, but I was early,” Sue says. “So I thought I’d kill time and have a drink, but the bar was crowded. I spotted one seat near a bunch of men in Navy uniforms. I thought, ‘Good, I’ll sit there, because sailors have a girl in every port and I’m not interested in that. I’ll stay quiet and be on time to meet my friends.’ I ordered my drink and looked up to see the man on my right staring at me. He wasn’t even embarrassed about it, and he didn’t talk; he just stared. I thought it was funny.”

Soon enough, John recovered his easy way with people and struck up a conversation that had Sue skipping her planned dinner and closing down the bar at 2am with this sailor asking her the clichéd question: “Will you
wait for me?” Sue knew boys who’d been killed in Vietnam and didn’t like the idea of worrying about someone possibly going into that same war. But she also couldn’t say goodbye. She handed John her address and invited him to write to her, which he did every other day for two years. On his second leave to come home, they became engaged.

Crete was not Vietnam. Souda Bay seemed scenic and peaceful to John, and being back in Europe reminded him of his happy childhood with his family at a time when his new Navy family seemed to mirror that, growing nearly as tight as brothers. John was part of a small detachment of naval personnel who were establishing a new U.S. naval base at Souda Bay to provide support for U.S. forces operating in the Mediterranean. John’s work provided a satisfying mix of physical labor, planning meetings and administrative duties. He felt lucky to be there.

“I look back at my time in the military, as well as my time in college,
as a valuable manual on the art of growing up,” John muses. “Both on campus and at sea, we all looked out for each other. I found out that together we’re stronger, we can get more done and you can always learn from the next person. When I came out of the Navy, I was eager for life. I was ready to get a job, get married and be a dad.” After two years as a Navy man, that’s exactly what he did, in that order. The job came first.

**CAREER MAN, CUBS FAN**

“I wanted to work as an accountant but not in a big accounting firm indistinguishable from the other Chicago firms,” John recalls. “I read an article that said that Marshall Field’s on State Street was expanding its accounting department, so I just called up and asked for an appointment to meet with the person who was doing the hiring. It was as simple as that, and they hired me.”

After a small but lively wedding, John and Sue found an apartment on the north side, and before long they started their family. First came baby Jennifer, then one by one the others: Justin, David, Lora and Valerie. Sue stayed home with their kids and enrolled part-time at Chicago’s Loyola University to complete a teaching degree she’d started years earlier. Once Valerie was off to kindergarten, Sue began teaching in the public schools.

Living not far from Wrigley Field, the whole family became dedicated Cubs fans, spending many afternoons as cheerful bleacher bums. When they moved to Evanston, the first suburb north, they’d hop an L train to continue their devotion as good fans. Years later, when the “lovable losers” were on the way to winning the 2016 World Series, John’s five kids made sure their parents had worthy seats for one playoff game and one series game.

“Until then, the only times I’d ever seen my father cry were when my grandparents died,” Justin Doe reports. “But when Dad watched the Cubbies win Game 5 against Cleveland in the World Series, the tears really flowed.”

Baseball wasn’t the only game in town; Chicago has always been known for 16-inch, slow-pitch softball. John brought his first-baseman talents to the local men’s leagues,
playing with park district teams throughout his adult life.

Of course, his day job took up most of John’s time. Working at Marshall Field’s was fulfilling for John and pleased all the family members, who enjoyed a discount on everything in the department store and ate more Frango Mints than they care to tally up. John received several promotions and was in his 18th year of managing the accounting department when the company that owned Macy’s bought the Marshall Field brand and stores. John was offered a deal to remain at his position for roughly the same salary, but the thrill was gone. It wasn’t just that the iconic clock now cornered a store with a Macy’s logo, or that the signature Field’s green bags were replaced by red ones. By 2006 retail was becoming less personal—more online and less “bricks and mortar”—and John felt ready for a change.

A FRESH DIRECTION

“That’s when Act Two of my life began,” John says. By this time, his children were grown and, when she heard what John had in mind, Sue was open to leaving her job at a middle school in order to help him build a new business.

In the back of his mind, John had always known that someday he’d want to use his language skills. His vision was to set up neighborhood foreign language schools, offering classroom instruction for all ages in a dozen different languages supplemented by computer software. Students could choose one method or the other—a real classroom or a
virtual one—or combine the two. He felt that this model would serve urban children and busy working adults very well. Sue had her three decades of teaching experience to call upon, and John provided the business acumen. The couple had some savings, so they went for their new dream. It took them 18 months to hammer out the details, and in 2008 the Does opened the first two locations of Academy Si Oui Ja (translation: Yes Yes Yes) in Evanston and in Chicago’s Loop. Within five years, they had expanded the company to eight Chicagoland locations with another two each in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin.

The big events in John’s life seem to happen all at once. Yin and Yang. Just as the night he met Sue was bittersweet because he was being deployed the following morning, so was the excitement of John’s new professional venture dampened by some bad news. A few weeks before the launch of the first Si Oui Ja schools, John learned that he had lung cancer. The tumor was small, caught early when John’s cautious doctor ordered further tests after a routine physical exam indicated a swollen lymph node. After surgery to remove the tumor, John underwent six weeks of chemotherapy while continuing to prepare his new educational program.

“We were still developing the curriculum for our schools and walking outside together every day to keep up John’s spirits and energy,” Sue remembers. “We became even closer during that time, talking about the future with optimism and yet a hint of hesitation because of the unpredictability of it all. We didn’t really know what would happen with the illness, and the schools—well, they could be a huge success or a dismal failure! We were taking a leap of faith there. But we kept our focus on getting John healthy and establishing Si Oui Ja in the education marketplace. So far, so good on both counts!”

From the schools’ inception, John has always taught some of the classes
himself. His classroom became a sort of laboratory for him to constantly tweak the computer software and, later, an online program he added. Basing the foundation on his memories of picking up languages through the joy of learning about each new culture, John infused his program with the wonder of curiosity. Instead of learning to say, “Here is a big dog,” or “Mother takes the train to work,” students at Si Oui Ja become immersed in the geography, history and people of the countries in which the language is spoken. In this way, along with learning to speak the language, they gain all sorts of information. A 2014 editorial in the Chicago Tribune praised John’s methods as “the most innovative approach we’ve seen to teaching not only foreign languages but any subject.” As of 2018, Si Oui Ja has educated more than 30,000 online and in-class students.

**ENJOYING LIFE**

Although they stay involved in the business, today John and Sue Doe spend more time with grandchildren and less time teaching languages. Two of their children, Justin and Lora, are running the schools. Most semesters, John can be found in front of a different classroom in his post as an instructor at the University of Illinois Chicago campus (UIC). Simply titled “Teaching Language,” his course spreads the techniques he created to the next generation of foreign language educators.

“Moving around so much when I was young prepared me for a life of continuous learning,” John reflects. “You know you’re always following a map of sorts, but you never know exactly where the routes will take you. Sometimes the surprise is the best part.”

© Write My Memoirs 2018