

## Betty Thompson - Trip of a Lifetime

The story of Betty Thompson's trip to the Redwoods National Forest in Weott, California is one of family, friends, hope, community and faith. What began as a "Bold Step" item on a PATH ended with a new group of friends celebrating the journey of a lifetime.

In February of 2013 friends and family gathered at Oakhurst Baptist Church in support of 66 year-old Betty. Her hopes, dreams, gifts, talents and opportunities were laid out before the group through the creation of her PATH. Teaching at universities, growing her greeting card business, having a home of her own and visiting the Redwoods National Forest in California were all steps she wanted to take by the year 2015. In typical bold Betty fashion it was decided that the trip to California would take the most time, talent and planning – so it would be the first to be done.

A trip of this magnitude required logistics, a willing team of people/friends and a healthy sum of money to work from. Everyone has their gifts and people came forward to offer theirs. A group of church friends who were talented in logistics, travel, and photography, and who also schedules that would allow for travel, volunteered to experience the Redwoods with Betty. Her traveling team would include Diana Lynn Farmer, Dee Ann Dozier, Elise Phillips and Trina Baldwin along with two caregivers.

To tell the full story of Betty in the fundraising campaign it was decided that a video should be added to her Crowdrise crowdsourcing website. As longtime friend Mark Crenshaw translated, Betty used her letter board to tell the story of her late father, his work with the California Conservation Corps, and why she had to experience it for herself. The website containing the video of Betty telling her story was shared with her friends who shared it with their friends. People from near and far, people who had known Betty for years, along with those who had only seen Betty in the video gave what they could. Through community, church and online fundraising, more than \$15,000 was raised to fund the trip.

While getting the funds was a huge hurdle that had to be overcome, other details proved tricky as well. Would the airlines be able to accommodate her power chair? How would her support staff arrange their schedules? Who would drive the two vans needed to go from Los Angeles to Weott California? The gifts of the group were put to use in facing these challenges. Options were discussed, calls were made, questions were answered, and eventually airline tickets were purchased.

The Atlanta Journal and Constitution wrote an article on the community coming together to make Betty's dream a reality. Along the way the Save The Redwoods League which not only made recommendations on ADA accessible paths in the forests; but also sent "Save the Redwoods" clothing for the entire Georgia crew.

On June 18<sup>th</sup> the seven women left from Hartsfield Jackson International Airport with only three definite goals:

1. Get to California
2. Get to the Redwoods
3. Get back to Atlanta

Everything else that would happen during their travels would simply be icing on the cake. That icing started with the awesome assistance of the Crisis Resolution Officials and crew from Delta Airlines in Atlanta and in Los Angeles. Much of the time spent traveling from Los Angeles was a blur of laughter, singing, eating and admiring the scenery. The entire group agrees that there could never be enough time for them to do all and see everything that the region has to offer. The Golden Gate Bridge and the northern California beaches were beautiful; but nothing compared to the view when they arrived at the Humboldt State Park Redwood Forest.

Welcoming them were park staff members Laurel Franklin and Debbie Gardner. They guided the group through the trees, some which are more than 2000 years old. With the exception of the half mile when the battery in Betty's chair failed to work, and Laurel and fellow traveler Trina Baldwin pushed Betty, their time in the forest was perfect. Baldwin reflected. "Betty wants to determine her own path and destiny and she did just that with this trip. I am amazed by Betty's grace and her willingness to be cared for."

Memories were captured in photographs of the beaches and the trees; but the bond that the women share now was the greatest thing that occurred that couldn't actually be captured in pictures. The travelers were brought closer together as were the Oakhurst community, and all who heard Betty's story. However, in the end it was Betty's experiencing the same majestic beauty that her father had, that was the greatest union.

Betty says, "My favorite thing was driving through the chandelier tree. My dad said he went through it in a truck. Dad was with me in the wind and in the redwood trees saying, 'Hurray, you did it!'"