

Schaefer and Snoops: Friendship for the Ages

Ex-Md. Governor Attends to Longtime Companion

By Karl Vick
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He's getting close.

"Three sixty-two. Oh my," says William Donald Schaefer, reading off the room numbers as he zips through the hallway of a retirement home in Columbia.

"Three sixty-four," says the former Maryland governor. "Oh my. Oh my. Three sixty-six. Oh Lord."

And there, just over the threshold of Room 368, waits Hilda Mae Snoops. Schaefer's "longtime companion" sits erect in her wheelchair, hands folded in her lap, expression so neutral it could be deadpan.

"Hey, you," says Schaefer, bending over her. "How you feeling today?"

"Terrible," says Hilda Mae Snoops.

"That's good!"

The sign out on the lawn reads "Harmony Hall." And indoors, that's essentially what Schaefer and Snoops still have—harmony, in their own fashion—three years after leaving the Governor's Mansion and the eye of the public, which never knew quite what to make of their relationship.

Friends for 40 years, "companions" for the last 25, the pair kept house together only during Schaefer's two-term tenure as governor. When it ended in 1995, the original plan called for retiring to adjoining town houses in Anne Arundel County, resuming an arrangement of arm's-length coziness that the pair long enjoyed at the beach, where they had side-by-side trailers.

But Snoops's health, fragile for years, took a turn for the worse, and after a stroke left her partially



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William Donald Schaefer visits with Hilda Mae Snoops, who was official Maryland hostess during his administration.

paralyzed on her left side, she moved instead to a nursing home she hated. A week ago, she was uprooted again, moving this time to the assisted-living building at Harmony Hall.

Through it all, one constant has remained. The man she alone can call "Donnie" visits every second day. He was there Thursday. He's due again today, Valentine's Day.

"It's sort of like a storybook romance, but without the romance," says Dena Scheyer, who comes in weekdays to help Snoops, at Schaefer's expense. "It's very unique and unusual that you could be separated from someone and still have the emotions and the devotion. And that's what he has."

Schaefer smiles a contented smile and pats his knee as best he can with

Snoops clutching the index finger. "It was always a unique relationship, wasn't it, old girl?"

He calls her that. Also: "Hilda Lou." Almost no one else, however, is quite sure how to refer to the woman born Hilda Mae Noone 73 years ago.

"This is his girlfriend?" asks Nelson J. Sabatini, Schaefer's friend and former secretary of health,

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William Donald Schaefer holds the hand of Hilda Mae Snoops, who lives in an assisted-living building in Columbia after suffering a stroke.

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running through the usual options. "This is his close friend? His dear friend? You know, lady friend?"

"Special friend!" Sabatini decides.

As governor, Schaefer solved the problem by naming her Official Maryland Hostess. Now she is again simply Hilda Mae. A thoroughbred horse shares the name. So does one of the cranes that unloads freighters at the Dundalk docks.

"Well, we're not normal. Hilda Mae and I have never been normal," Schaefer says, not without pride. Beside him, Snoops nods her assent.

"They grew up a few miles apart in west Baltimore, she an electrician's

daughter on Lindsay Road, he on Edgewood Street, the only child of a lawyer and a housewife. They first got to know each other—"not too well," Schaefer says—at the Democratic Club meetings he convened every second Wednesday at the Franklinton Inn in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The usual agenda was eating crabs and raising money for Schaefer, who was then on the Baltimore City Council.

By then, Hilda Mae was divorced from a man named Snoops, though it would be a few years before she and Schaefer started keeping company. She had—along with two sons and a daughter—a career, first in nursing, then at the federal Health Care Fi-

nancing Administration. She retired in 1986, the year Schaefer was elected governor after earning an international reputation as Baltimore mayor.

Schaefer, 76, still calls his 15 years governing Baltimore "the greatest time of my life," and Snoops was by his side for much of it. When he settled a bet by diving into the seal pool at the National Aquarium, she handed him the rubber ducky. When he departed the city dressed as an admiral, it was Snoops who swung open the door of the crate labeled, "Baltimore's Gift to Maryland."

Neither really felt at home in Annapolis. The mansion has 54 rooms, and Schaefer preferred to

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sleep in the house where he had lived with his mother, Tululu, until her death in 1983. When he finally moved into the mansion, one year into his first term, Snoops came along.

History will remember her as the woman who opened the mansion to the masses. She shamed the General Assembly out of funds to replace tattered carpets and rotted woodwork, then held a series of open houses, including Christmas parties for profoundly retarded patients from the state hospitals. At Harmony Hall, her apartment living room is dominated by a lush color photo of the bronze fountain that Snoops designed for the mansion grounds, a privately financed project so controversial that it was watched over by a security camera hidden in a nearby birdhouse.

Less known is what Snoops did with the mansion's private quarters to make them comfortable for a lifelong bachelor and creature of habit. The screens out back were painted in landscapes, like the front stoop screen doors of the Baltimore row house. Problems with the kitchen were addressed.

"She had to teach the cooks how to cook regular," Schaefer says. "Pork and mashed potatoes and sauerkraut. They really didn't know what sauerkraut was, these French guys. They weren't French, but they were raised French."

It worked. "My abiding recollection is nice quiet dinners in the small television room right on the north side of the building," says Timothy F. Maloney, a former Democratic legislator from Prince George's County. "It was a scene you could have seen in west Baltimore or 100 different neighborhoods. Nothin' fancy."

Snoops did not campaign, or, as she puts it, "stomp the bushes" for Schaefer. But that may have been the only thing she did not do for him. Friends and rivals alike remember her as a sort of force field around the executive, operating in the official and the personal realm.

"In order to be his friend, you accepted both of them," says Hilda Ford, Schaefer's director of personnel. "And I have no trouble doing that, because I felt she was a little bit okay."

So formidable was Snoops's presence in the Schaefer administration that even friends still refuse to talk about how famously hard she can be if things don't go her way. But the staff at Harmony Hall is finding out for itself.

"I've only run into one aide here who was a pain in the ass!" Snoops announces.

Schaefer: "Oooooof! That language!"

Snoops: "She's not here anymore."

Reporter: "Did you get rid of her?"

Snoops (with a tight smile): "I worked on it."

The former governor shakes his great head. "This sweet lady can be one tough lady," he says.

It may be what he likes best about her. In any event, friends say it's the quality Schaefer seems most anxious to check on. He cannot visit Snoops without asking:

"Do you want me to sing?"

"No."

"Do you want me to hum?"

"No."

"Do you want me to whistle?"

"No."

"Do you want me to shut up?"

"Yes."

Scheyer, the weekday helper, says she knows what's being communicated here.

"He says that just to aggravate her, because he wants to see her spunk," she says. "Because if he sees her sassing, he knows she's well. He knows she's Hilda Mae."