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From East Germany to West Chester: Ivonne Finnin's Reflections on Fate, Family, and the 30th Anniversary of the Fall of the Berlin Wall

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from east germany to west chester

IVONNE FINNIN'S REFLECTIONS ON FATE, FAMILY, AND THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

By **Laura Di Giovine**

Photos by **Kristin Ann Photography**

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. On that iconic day, November 9, 1989, Ivonne (Nitsche) Finnin was 11 years old. “It was an exciting time full of hope for the future of Germany, but for my family it was also a time of uncertainty,” she says. Ivonne may live in West Chester now, but she grew up in the rural town of Teterow, East Germany under Communist rule. “Within months of the reunification, both of my parents lost their jobs due to the restructuring of the East German economy. They had three young kids to support, and it was then that my father started his own business as a wholesaler for agricultural products.”

Many Germans—both those living in the East and West—were adversely affected during the Cold War era. In the West, (the Federal Republic of Germany, or FRG), families were separated and travel beyond the Iron

Curtain was difficult. In the East, the Soviet-supported Stasi controlled the German Democratic Republic (GDR). One of the most repressive and effective secret police agencies in the world, the Stasi were widely feared in the GDR; as well as engaging in foreign espionage, they were responsible for tightly controlled domestic surveillance and relied upon a vast network of informants to spy on friends, neighbors, and even family members. By 1989, the Stasi maintained files on approximately 6 million East German citizens—over one-third of the population. [Source: Britannica.com.] Food shortages were also common in the East and access to the global market was highly limited.

Despite the turmoil brewing in East and West Germany, Ivonne had a very good childhood. Living in the countryside, she never felt the oppression that is frequently depicted in books and movies about life in the GDR. She

received a high quality public education and enjoyed the youth activities and celebrations that the government put on for the community. For example, she was a member of the Pioneers—the GDR’s equivalent of the Scouts—and loved it. And, despite the food shortages that affected urban centers, food was plentiful in Teterow. “There was never a shortage of food growing up,” Ivonne recalls. Her grandmother Rita kept a garden, she canned vegetables, and there was very little waste. Ivonne remembers that exotic produce like bananas and watermelons were rare, but grocery items such as bread were very cheap. “We may not have had a large variety of products to choose from, but there was always enough to eat and no one went hungry,” she adds.

Ivonne also comes from a long line of educated working women. In the GDR, it was quite common for women to be employed and to receive a higher education since the government strove for gender equality. Both her mother and her grandmother Rita were college educated and they perceived working as a form of empowerment and self-fulfillment. After World War II, her grandmother graduated from a college in Dresden and obtained a job as a teacher in rural Thuerkow near the Baltic Sea. Ivonne’s mother went on to have a successful career as Director of the German Red Cross in Teterow.

Since her mother and grandmother had always worked full-time to support their families, Ivonne jokes that she is a first generation stay-at-home mom. She originally planned to come to the United States for one year to experience living in another country, travel, and to improve her English skills before attending a university in Berlin. Now, she has lived in the U.S. for over 20 years! Within the first year of moving to Pittsburgh, she met her future husband John Finnin, an airline pilot for TWA (and now American Airlines). They married in 2001. She received her B.A. in Finance from Robert Morris University and has worked at several companies, including a communications position at Bayer Corporations in Pittsburgh, before becoming a homemaker after the birth of their first child, Kirstin (15). The Finnins have two other children, Caroline (12) and Konrad (10).

After many years in Pittsburgh—and a one year stint in St. Louis and subsequently Fort Myers, Florida—the Finnins moved to West Chester in 2017. John says, “The motivation to move was solely driven by our family needs. The demands of living in Pittsburgh and flying to Dallas, my base at the time, were limiting the most precious gift of family life: time together. Therefore, we decided to take a “leap of faith” and sell our house, in one day, and venture into the unknown. We trusted that wherever our destination, it would be the place that best meets the needs of our family. It just happened to be here in West



From top to bottom: Ivonne, her mother Marina, her grandmother Rita, and her daughter, Kirstin Photo credit: Foto Manthey

Chester. In hindsight, we recognize that our prayers were faithfully answered.”

Ivonne adds, “We were really impressed with the beauty of this area, including the borough and the established neighborhoods with mature trees. And, we loved the excellent school district and the minimal commute for John.” Their neighborhood in East Goshen is a great plus, too. Ivonne says, “We received a very nice welcome by our neighbors, school, and church community. We love the neighborhood we live in! There are social events throughout the year and a community pool that allows us to catch up with neighbors living on the opposite side of the neighborhood. We had such an easy transition that we feel very at home here, and I’m currently serving on our neighborhood association board.”

The Finnin family motto is: “Eat well, pray more, love more.” They are active members of Saints Peter and Paul Parish in West Chester, and when they aren’t busy with work and running kids to activities, they enjoy spending time as a family, especially at family dinners. Both John and Ivonne enjoy going on walks, and John likes to read and go to the gym. Ivonne loves gardening, DIY home improvement projects, and watching German TV. They also have a 5-year-old Pekapoo named Spice. Their oldest daughter Kirstin enjoys spending time with friends, running, pet sitting, and playing volleyball and lacrosse. Caroline enjoys spending time with friends, playing volleyball and soccer, and reading, writing, drawing and painting. Finally, Konrad enjoys his friends, roller coasters, and everything sports! His favorite sport is ice hockey (he is a big fan of the Pittsburgh Penguins), and he plays for Shanahan Ice Hockey Club. He also enjoys flag football, basketball, and lacrosse.

Spice





Ivonne standing outside the Faces of the Berlin Wall exhibit at West Chester University
 Photo credit: John Finnin

Every year, the Finnins visit Ivonne's family in Germany and add on a trip to other cities and countries as their vacation budget allows. This past summer they took a wonderful Baltic Sea cruise from Germany to Estonia, Russia, and Finland. Ivonne says, "We really enjoy learning about different cultures, history, and local food." In addition, John recently began flying routes to Bologna and Berlin, and he loves exploring the cities during his layovers.

As the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall draws near, Ivonne is proud to have been featured in a current West Chester University exhibit, *Faces of the Berlin Wall: Divided Lives and Legacies 30 Years After the Fall*, which is free and open to the public and runs until February 1, 2020. Co-curated by students, who collected Ivonne's oral history and have displayed some of her personal effects, the exhibition is part of WCU's Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology, a dynamic teaching museum on campus.

Museum director Dr. Michael A. Di Giovine says, "The student co-curators of this exhibit felt very strongly that we needed to go beyond the standard Cold War narrative of East versus West, and focus on the real, lived experiences of individuals affected by a divided Germany. They collected artifacts and oral histories from West Chester community members who grew up on both sides of the Iron Curtain and who had very different experiences—from former U.S. military stationed in West Berlin to an East German athlete who defected, to average people living day to day. We hope that it provides a more nuanced understanding of this important political period and the connection West Chester has to this iconic moment in history."

Frauke Schnell, the Chair of the Political Science Department at WCU, grew up in West Germany and recalls that for those who did not have family in East, East Germany was a foreign country. "I grew up less than ten miles from the Iron Curtain separating the East and the West, yet I knew very little of East Germany, less than I knew about France, the Netherlands or any other Western European country. I went to the East for the first time just a few days after the wall in Berlin and the border between East and West Germany fell. Friends and family who went before, told me that it was a very moving experience. I strongly doubted it, but still today recall my emotional reaction when I visited the country and the people who lived just ten miles east of me. The peaceful reunification of Germany was one of the most positive and amazing events of the 20th century."

Ivonne agrees with the significance of the reunification and says, "Although I have very fond memories of the simplicity of my childhood in East Germany, I cannot imagine living without religious and political freedom and the right to travel." Far from the Wall, West Chester is her home now and she feels this is where her family is meant to be at this time.



Through February 1, 2020
Faces of the Berlin Wall:
Divided Lives and Legacies
30 Years After the Fall

West Chester University, 775 S. Church St. –
 Old Library, West Chester, PA 19383
www.wcupa.edu/museum

Featuring historical artifacts from both East and West Berlin, this exhibition traces the history of the wall, explains its engineering, examines the lived experiences of East and West Berliners, and exhibits the many "afterlives" that the wall – and its image – has taken thirty years after it was dismantled.

Calling all West Chester families!
 Do you have an interesting story to share? Nominate yourself or your neighbor to be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact us at ldigiovine@bestversionmedia.com.