



Self-Made

Sibylle Grebe's long road to the law includes work as an au pair in Indiana and a waitress at the Pink Pussycat club

BY JESSICA P. OGILVIE



Sibylle Grebe

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Above, Grebe's family in Germany in 1958, (she's top right, in pigtails), and, at right, upon her return from the states in 1964 (she's in the white dress). Top photo is Grebe with her son in 1979, when she was about to embark on a legal career.

It was 1962, and Sibylle Grebe was a teenager at home alone in Augsburg, Germany, when the phone rang. The man on the other end was trying to reach her father, a Methodist minister.

"He said, 'My wife and I live in Geneva right now, she is pregnant and we are looking for an au pair,'" says Grebe, now 74. "I said, 'The minister isn't here right now, but if you come at 3:30 p.m. today, he will tell you he knows somebody in the church that will be the perfect person for you.'"

The person she had in mind, it turns out, was her, and the job led her to Geneva for eight months, then on to America. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me," she says.

Born in Germany after World War II, Grebe is the second-oldest of seven children. During the war, her father hid Jewish refugees in their home. "He would go out on the motorcycle at night to get potatoes and food for them," says Grebe. "Once, the Gestapo came to the house to look, because [someone] told them he was hiding Jews. He said, 'If you really believe that, the house is yours. Go look.' And he was so sure of himself they didn't look."

When she was young, her father would bring her along on visits to parishioners who were sick or ailing. "Sometimes the people would give me something special for [helping]," she says. "One lady cooked a meal—it was like, liver or something. The way she made it, with apples, I never forgot."

Grebe wasn't able to attend high school in Germany. "High school cost money," she says, "and we didn't have it." She was working as a seamstress when she got the au pair phone call, then signed a year-long contract. But once the family moved to Indianapolis, she says, her work became significantly

more difficult. The couple was young, says Grebe, and threw dinner parties "one after another," that would keep her up until 11 p.m. or midnight, only to have to get up early the next morning to care for the baby.

By the time the one-year contract was up, she was ready to move on. A friend from her father's church now lived in Long Beach, and she offered to host Grebe for a visit; then she suggested Grebe attend high school in So Cal. Grebe didn't have to be asked twice. "Once I saw the palm trees," she remembers, "I said, 'I want to live here.'"

After graduating, Grebe kept traveling between the U.S. and Germany, working an array of secretarial and hospitality-industry jobs, before returning to the U.S. for good in 1968. For a time, she was a receptionist at a law firm during the day, and a waitress at the legendary Pink Pussycat in Hollywood—a strip club frequented by the film industry's glitterati—at night. "I have a napkin from there signed by Bob Hope that's framed in the corner of my office," she says, "as a reminder of how I struggled."

Paul Wagner, for whom she worked as a legal secretary, was a big influence, and she decided to pursue law. But she was married with children, and her husband lost his job. So once again Grebe took on two jobs—house cleaner and law firm receptionist—all while attending Southwestern Law School through a program tailored for mothers with child care responsibilities.

In 1990, a year after getting her J.D., Grebe caught a break. Wanting to become a probate lawyer, she applied for and got a position with Duane Conover of Conover & Associates. When Conover was ready to leave the practice 10 years later, the name was changed to Conover & Grebe. "I have basically been running the office on my own from 2003 until now," says Grebe.

Some of her favorite cases involve helping people at low cost or pro bono, where she can figure out solutions for them "without having to go through lengthy litigation," she says.

Looking back on her time as an au pair, Grebe considers herself lucky. "I had to do all of that basically on my own," she says. "I am sort of a self-made person." **SL**

