

Old 'Barbie' pen pals bridge the years and miles

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(F16A)

By Susan Roelke
staff writer

You don't hear too much about pen pals anymore. The emphasis on expediency in communication has shoved letter writing aside. Instead of a page of prose, people are turning to fax to reach out and touch someone.

But for Sharon Smith of Livonia and Debbie Kelly of New Hampshire letter writing is alive and well, and responsible for maintaining a friendship that was born more than 20 years ago.

In fact, it wasn't until two years ago that the two women realized that telephone lines and roads also could connect the pair.

"I don't know why we never called sooner," Smith said. "We just didn't think of it."

Smith and Kelly, both 30, "found" each other through the Barbie Fan Club. Barbie is Mattel's fashion doll that made its debut to an eager young audience in the early '60s.

The women can't pinpoint the exact time they began writing, but they know it's been about 22 years. Smith's letters were destroyed when the family's basement flooded in Ypsilanti. Kelly has only a few of her old letters and pictures.

AFTER YEARS of corresponding, Kelly finally called Smith, and the Smith family made the trek to Plymouth, N.H.

"It was kind of scary going there and wondering

whether we would be compatible," Smith said. "But we got along like we'd been together for years. We confided in each other. Their family had become our family," Smith said.

"We're so similar," Smith added. "We both have the same model radio in the same exact spot in our kitchen. We came to breakfast in the exact — right down to the stitching on the pockets — jeans, we have the same swim-suit covers and the same kitchen canister sets which we both got from our mothers, and the same dish pattern."

Both women are married and have three children. Smith has two boys and one girl while Kelly has two girls and one boy.

"We got married the same year, and some people say our husbands look like brothers," she added.

THE KELLY family recently returned to New Hampshire, where they live outside of Plymouth on a small farm. Richard Kelly owns a small auto repair shop next to the family's home. Debbie is homemaker.

On their visit to Livonia, Debbie said: "This is a little different than what we are used to. We're country people and live a fairly quiet life, but it's been fun."

The Smiths plan to visit the Kellys in about two years. Barbie, the doll that brought the pair together, remains ageless. She's still around and as fashionable as ever. But, alas, little girls grow up. Neither Smith nor Kelly kept her Barbie.

"But I wish I had," Kelly said. "My daughter Lisa has a doll, and I had to buy it. It would've been nice to save mine and pass it on."

Man figures out system to help foil car thieves

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cars engraved through his process will be registered in the computerized data bank of the National Auto Theft Bureau.

THE KEY to the difference between Haplak's and AAA's programs is cost. While AAA is offering to etch both

member and non-member cars for free, Haplak is marketing his engraving process to auto dealers who will be expected to charge customers about \$100 to get their cars marked.

According to Haplak, this cost could be recovered through the reduced premiums many insurance companies offer to persons who have installed anti-theft deterrents in their cars. AAA,

however, does not.

"We offer no reductions for anti-theft devices at this time," noted Leonard Bach, AAA's claims director. "We know they're effective but we're not sure how effective. We're looking at statistics."

Bach admitted that Haplak's engraving would be more effective than the etching AAA is providing. But he denied that the etchings could be removed.

"It cannot be buffed out without to-

tally distorting the glass," he said. "A professional thief may break out all the glass but, if he tries to sell the car to another person, the replacement costs are going to be \$600. We think it will deter some thefts. It will not end thefts."

SINCE 1957, Haplak has been president of Michigan Industrial Engraving, at 33980 Industrial Drive in Livonia. Last year, after being prompted by reports of increasing numbers of stolen cars, he founded Auto I.D. & Certification Corp. at the same location.

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