

HER DREAM DIDN'T DIE

After 47 years, woman heeds President Kennedy's call.

By **ELLYN PAK**

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ORANGE • The house is nearly empty, decades of memories packed into boxes lining the living room.

It takes Jan Carmichael a little more

than a month to sift through her possessions. It's a re-living of sorts, like she's died and come back to walk through chapters of a past life.

Letters her children penned from

SEE **DREAM** • PAGE 4



Carmichael

DREAM

FROM PAGE 1

camp. An invitation to a fateful Robert Kennedy celebration at the Ambassador Hotel. Photos from numerous weddings and even more of her grandchildren.

In less than a week, the 69-year-old will give the rest of the items away, save for about 80 pounds of necessities: Two shirts, two pants, two shoes. A raincoat and a jacket. Sunscreen and a camera.

Soon, there will be nothing holding her back. She'll get to do something she's dreamed of for more than 47 years.

She's preparing for a new adventure, one that she hopes will help her find a purpose in life. She's filled with a mixture of conflicting emotions, mainly apprehension and excitement.

"I needed something to be useful," she says. "I didn't really feel like I had that here."

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Jan grew up in Westchester, a neighborhood in Los Angeles near LAX, with an insatiable curiosity for politics.

Her interest was piqued when she was 10 years old at a polling site during the 1948 presidential election. It was the year Harry Truman ran for

president and won. Jan incubated that interest and dove into student government at Westchester High School.

She married young, at age 18. She skipped college. She gave birth to her first child at 19. At 22, she had three children.

But Jan was determined to infuse politics into her hectic schedule. It was an invigorating time for young people, and Jan wanted to be in the thick of things.

She waltzed into John F. Kennedy's headquarters in Los Angeles in 1960 to volunteer for his presidential campaign. Jan eventually walked precincts and knocked on doors, often with her kids.

Many were entranced by Kennedy, a bright-eyed politician who had a knack for inspiring young people. In October 1960, at the University of Michigan, Kennedy encouraged college students to serve their country and spread a message of peace in underdeveloped countries.

That message - which would evolve into the Peace Corps program the next year - inspired Jan.

The thought of volunteering in another country was appealing, but there was no way she could abandon her three young children.

On Nov. 22, 1963, President

Kennedy was assassinated. Jan, pregnant with her fourth child, heard it on the radio in her home.

"It was real dramatic," she says. "I don't know how anyone who lived at that time can explain how Kennedy had an impact on the populace."

Jan continued volunteering. She worked on Lyndon B. Johnson's presidential campaign in 1964. Four years later, she worked on the presidential campaign for another Kennedy, John's younger brother Robert.

His death, in June 1968 at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, was just as shocking as the assassination of his older brother, Jan says. She walked precincts that day and chose to go home instead of the hotel where Kennedy followers were celebrating.

Jan shied away from politics for the next four years. By then, the Peace Corps was out of the question.

By the early '70s, Jan divorced and became a single mother. She worked multiple jobs at a time to keep things together for her five children.

The family moved to Orange in 1984.

Jan continued volunteering in various ways. Girl Scouts. Boy Scouts. Little League. Junior Olympics. Red Cross. Various political campaigns. Life

zoomed by.

She became a secretarial assistant at an Irvine law firm, Fiore, Racobs & Powers, in 1989.

At work, Jan sold candy bars to raise money for various charities. She put together care packages for the brother of a copy clerk who was deployed in Iraq.

Outside of work, she joined the Volunteer Clowns of Orange County. She was a hospice volunteer.

"She's the most humble human being in the world," says Sally Moseley, a friend at the law firm.

But it wasn't enough. Jan needed a new challenge, a re-direction.

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After so many years, she looked up the Peace Corps.

Jan never thought older folks could join. But when she called and inquired, she was surprised to learn seniors were encouraged to apply.

The median age of a Peace Corps volunteer is 25. Jan was in her late 60s with brand-new knees and a slimmer body thanks to gastric bypass surgery in 2004.

She began the application process last year, much to her children's surprise.

On April 24 of this year, she was officially invited to join the corps. She'd be sent to Tanza-

nia to work on environmental education and sustainable agriculture systems.

Less than a month later, Jan left her job at the law firm. She cleared out her house and sold some items. She gave away memorabilia, including a letter she received from Robert Kennedy. She said her goodbyes to loved ones.

"I'm very proud of her," her daughter Kristin says. "It's something she's wanted to do for a long time. Now she has the opportunity. Knowing my mother, it's the self-satisfaction she's helped to do something for the world."

"What a gratification it would feel to end your life knowing that you've done this," she adds. "I really think it's going to be a positive thing for her and us."

Jan left Wednesday. Her destination isn't final, but she knows she's going to an area of Tanzania presumably without plumbing, electricity or running water.

What she does know is that her dream has come true.

"I'm going with an open mind," she says. "I hope to be accepted. I hope that I can make a contribution somehow."

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