



# Barbara Brabec's World

It's All About *LIFE*, Folks!

## Remembering Harry Brabec

(1927 – 2005)

### A Special Tribute by His Widow

Originally published in 2005 on [BarbaraBrabec.com](http://BarbaraBrabec.com); Updated and reformatted for publication on [BarbaraBrabecProductions.com](http://BarbaraBrabecProductions.com).

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### Part I: The Last of a Dying Breed

**HARRY'S LIFELONG CAREER** as a drummer began at the age of seven. By the age of 14, he had played a few performances with the then-widely-known Cole Brothers Circus, which in turn led to a lifelong interest in the circus and in circus and band music.

Before Harry met and married me in 1961, his musical skills had been recognized in every sort of setting from lounges featuring the jazz greats of the nation to the bands of Wayne King, Woody Herman, and Chuck Foster, to major symphony orchestras.

*Below left, Harry drumming with the Chuck Foster Orchestra in 1945; at right, Touring with the Wayne King Orchestra in 1949-1951.*





Harry was a member of the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington, D.C. for three years and a member of the Civic Orchestra of Chicago for one season. In 1951, he joined the Chicago Symphony Orchestra as a section percussionist and a year later was appointed Principal Percussionist by then-music-director Rafael Kubelik, a conductor he greatly admired. When Fritz Reiner took over the baton, however, Harry and many other CSO members found life more difficult.

For some reason Harry never understood, Reiner did not like him, and they constantly tangled horns over the years until Reiner finally had Harry removed from the orchestra in 1956. (My memoir, [\*The Drummer Drives!\*](#) includes many backstage stories about Harry's years with the CSO, his often humorous experiences with Reiner, and stories from other Symphony percussionists who shared their own stories and memories of Harry.) After leaving the Chicago Symphony, Harry was on staff at NBC for two years, where he played with the NBC Symphony of Chicago.

Later, after we were married, Harry was rehired by the Chicago Symphony as assistant Stage Librarian for two years and then appointed Stage Manager in 1968, a position he held until June 1971. During this second tenure with the CSO, Harry frequently performed as an extra percussionist, and seeing him perform on stage in his white tie and tails always gave me a thrill.

## An Exceptional Musician



**HARRY PLAYED ALL PERCUSSION INSTRUMENTS**, including keyboard instruments and tympani, but he was best known among his peers for his superb snare drum playing. He was both a fine classical musician and a great jazz drummer who could make any band rock! He was never better than when he played Melody Top Theater for three seasons right after we were married. This summer tent theater in Hillside, Illinois (now gone) featured leading stars of the day and, as his wife, I always had a ringside seat for every show he played there, including *Hit the Deck*, *Kiss Me Kate*, *Wonderful Town*, *Fanny*, *Sound of Music*, *The Music Man*, and *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*.

*Playing a show at the Shubert*

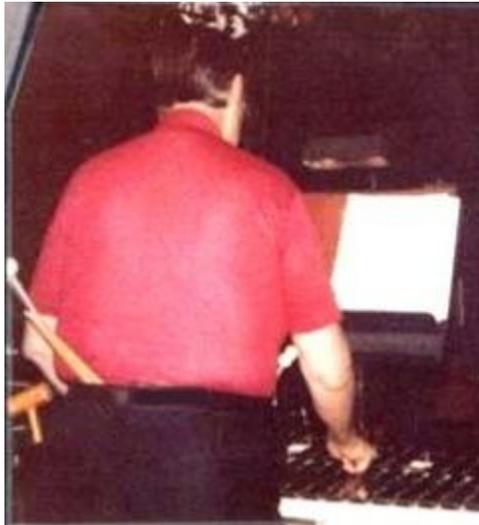
In 1962, Harry became the house drummer at the Shubert Theater in Chicago, where shows usually ran for several months. Once again, I had a front row seat for every musical that came into town, including *Carnival*, *Stop the World*, *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*, and *Oliver*. As a freelance musician, Harry had his pick of available work, and when he wasn't doing shows at the Shubert or Melody Top, he might be playing with the Lyric Opera, Grant Park, or Ravinia. He also played *Cabaret* and *A Chorus Line* (see photos below) when these shows came to the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area.

**RIGHT:** Harry loved working with these girls in the musical, *Sound of Music* (1965).



During his life-long career as a professional musician or orchestra manager, Harry worked with countless orchestras and entertainers, including Bob Hope, Tony Bennett, Danny Thomas, Danny Kaye, Sonny & Cher, and many others. As his wife, I was privileged to meet such greats as Pete Fountain, Ella Fitzgerald, and Carol Channing.

**BELOW:** Playing *A Chorus Line*. Everyone got a kick out of the way Harry organized his mallets for fast changes in his tight working space.



Each percussionist had to figure out his own system for how he was going to make fast stick exchanges when playing *A Chorus Line*.

**NOTE:** Details about all these "musical adventures" and the many percussionists, musicians, entertainers, bands, orchestras, and conductors Harry worked with during his fifty-year career as a musician are also detailed in my memoir, *The Drummer Drives! Everybody Else Rides: The Musical Life and Times of Harry Brabec, Legendary Chicago Symphony Percussionist and Humorist* (2010; [available on Amazon](#)) in both print and eBook editions.

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## PART II: Moving in New Directions



**IN 1971**, as Walt Disney World was preparing to open in Florida, Harry was invited to join the Walt Disney World Marching Band, so we moved to Orlando. Always a lover of band music, Harry jumped at the chance to do this work, and he was there playing the bass drum the day they threw open the gates to let in the first visitors. Of course, I was there, too, sharing the excitement of the moment with Harry.



There are many things at Disney World that tourists never see. In my *Drummer Drives* memoir, there's a chapter that includes stories from musicians who worked there, with a look at the life of

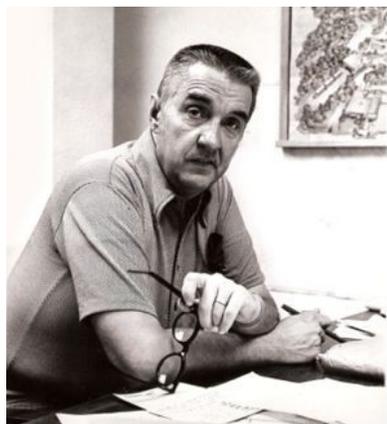
a Disney musician and the huge underground area of the park, which one newspaper writer called "a cavernous, eight-acre basement and a great place to be in a bomb attack." It's like a city down there, with tunnels leading to all areas of the park that are used by employees, maintenance workers, and the musicians and other entertainers who hang out there during their breaks.

After playing a season at Disney World, the physical work of carrying drums became too much for Harry's arthritic back, which by then had begun to give him a lot of pain. Clearly he had to find less strenuous work, and that's when the direction of both our professional lives began to change.

## Artisan Crafts & Silver Dollar City, Missouri

**AS I BECAME INTERESTED** in arts and crafts in the late 60s, Harry was developing a keen appreciation for fine craftsmanship. While he continued to play professionally in the Chicagoland area in 1971, we launched a home business to publish *Artisan Crafts* magazine, which thrived for five years. Later we joked that it was a literary success but a financial flop, but it served an important purpose in that it brought us a world of new friends across the country and showed both of that we had skills and talents we had not been using up to that point. As this publishing experience led me to write the first of several books, it also led Harry into the production of craft shows for several years. I was rather surprised to find that my drummer husband was also an exceptionally organized individual who could meticulously plan any event down to the last detail.

When Harry was appointed coordinator of the Fall Festival at Silver Dollar City in 1973—an event he managed for two seasons—he looked every bit the part of an executive. (See photo at left, in the SDC office.)



Harry liked the lively flavor of Ozark music and was very fond of Violet Hensley, one of Arkansas' best-known musicians. She made her own fiddles and was a show-stopping entertainer her whole life. Born in 1916, she published her autobiography (*on Amazon*) in 2014 and was inducted into the [National Fiddler Hall of Fame](#) in 2018. Harry would have been thrilled to know this.

Of course Harry loved every exhibit in the City that featured food. He personally inspected (*i.e., sampled*) all the homemade cheese being made daily and often brought home huge chunks that were made by City employees to demonstrate the craft but couldn't be sold. (Although he was no longer drinking in those days, he took great delight in successfully bringing a moonshine exhibit to the

festival, which required more than a little negotiating with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.) We lived in that area of Missouri until Harry could find a good excuse to move back to the Chicago area, which he missed so much.



**MISSOURI GAVE US** the most wonderful gift we ever got—an abandoned dog we saw one day on the property we'd bought near Silver Dollar City. When we learned she had been abused and then deserted by her owners and left to fend for herself in the nearby woods for six months, we immediately searched for and rescued her from certain death. She quickly won our hearts and graced our lives for thirteen years.

I'm currently telling her story in my book-in-progress titled, *Call of the Heart—A Rescue Dog's Dream*. (For more information, see the [BOOKS](#) department of my website.)

**ABOVE:** This treasured picture of Harry and Ginger was taken in 1980 when we traveled east on a business trip and stopped at Mystic Seaport. We covered 4,000 miles on that trip with Ginger in the back seat all the way. We drove 800 miles on the last day without a whimper from her, except when she asked for a pee stop halfway home. She simply nudged Harry's head and covered his cheek with kisses to get his attention.

## The International Crafts Exposition in Williamsburg, Virginia

**IN 1976,** Harry was invited to produce the first International Crafts Exposition for Busch Gardens in Williamsburg, Virginia. This first-of-a-kind event involved bringing together forty highly-skilled traditional American and European artisans and craftsmen who would demonstrate and sell their wares to an estimated quarter-of-a-million visitors. The work required two six-week trips abroad to search for interesting artisans who would demonstrate old-world skills. Harry found not only the unusual, but the rare. Many of the crafts he discovered had never been seen in America before, and a few techniques demonstrated at the Exposition were being practiced by only a few people in the world. Invited foreign craftspeople came from England, Scotland, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, Czechoslovakia, and Poland.



The first show was so successful that another show was held the following year, requiring another two lengthy trips abroad, this time including Russia. I was fortunate to be able to accompany Harry on the second of each of those trips, assisting him as a secretary as he signed the individual artisans to contracts to do the show. As documented in *The Drummer Drives!*, these trips were once-in-a-lifetime adventures filled with unforgettable people and places. Later, Harry also produced a major crafts show for the Marriott Theme Park in California.

## Winding Down a Musical Career



**AFTER AWHILE,** for economic reasons the theme parks were forced to stop producing events of this nature, and Harry went back to playing whenever and wherever he could find work. Meanwhile, he was also a part-time employee in my growing homebased writing/publishing business—and one of the best little tax deductions I ever had. He wasn't thrilled with this work, but without his help and support I would not be here today with a following on the Web.

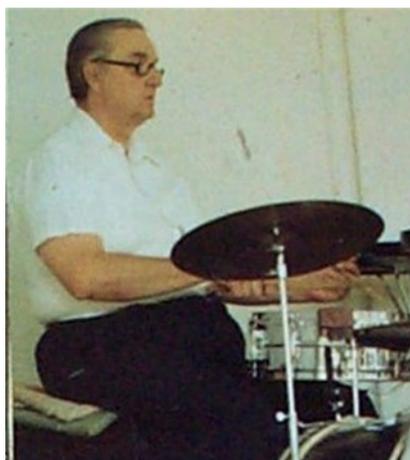
As Harry's health began to fail, he still played, but not as often, and usually with small orchestras or bands such as the fine concert band in Bensenville, Illinois (where he played for ten years) and [Windjammers](#), a circus organization whose members still gather once a year in Florida to play circus music just for the fun of it. One of his greatest thrills, he said, was riding the band wagon in 1982 in the parade for the "Western Days" celebration in Chatfield, Minnesota. (He's left of the flag at the back of the wagon.)

During 1963–1966, Harry taught percussion classes at Northwestern University and North Park College and often coached other professional drummers, not for pay, but for the pleasure of helping them grow professionally. Some told me that Harry's help made all the difference in their success as professional musicians. (*Some of those comments appear below.*)

***AT RIGHT:** Harry shares a technique with percussionists in the Marine Band when it performed in Naperville*



Giving up music as a profession was one of the hardest things Harry ever had to do. Although he did many other creative things in his professional life—and, to my way of thinking, had a life more exciting than most men could dream of—he always thought of himself simply as "a drummer." But he was much more than that. He was a musician who was highly respected by his peers, not only in the Chicagoland area, but across the country. And his sense of humor was legendary, as were the stories he always used to tell whenever he was among other musicians.



Once when he was the older drummer playing a job with a bunch of younger percussionists, they were all sitting around talking music and telling drummer stories with me listening in. After one fellow told a story about this anonymous drummer who once pulled a fast one on the infamous Fritz Reiner, Harry knocked their socks off when he laughed and said, "I was that drummer."

"My training came by way of hard knocks," he once said in an interview. He got a lot of laughs every time he delivered this little quip: "They say I'm one of the best drummers in the country," he would say seriously. Pausing for effect, he would then grin and add, "Not very good in the city, but really good in the country."

### **Comments from Other Percussionists**

"So much of what I am came from Harry." – Fred Wickstrom

"I admired Harry's playing and his expertise in percussion. We made several Windjammers' meets and I always enjoyed playing alongside him." – Doug MacLeod

"Harry was my mentor in school, and I emulated him. He blazed the trail for me." – Gordon Peters

"I always enjoyed hanging out with Harry, talking about big bands, symphony stuff, and life in general. He was my tympani teacher." – Bob Cousins

### **PART III: Moving from This World to the Next**

**HARRY DIED PEACEFULLY** at home at 4:30 a.m. on February 3, 2005. He was just 77 years old. After years of disability and pain and one last month of fighting for life in the hospital and a nursing home, I put him on hospice and brought him home where he so longed to be. If we could

all choose the way we died, one could not choose a more peaceful death than Harry experienced, in his own bedroom, with Dvorak's *New World Symphony* playing in the background and his wife and her two sisters there to hold his hands and caress his brow. His breathing and heartbeat simply slowed over the last half hour of his life, much like an old Victrola machine winding down until there was no power left and his soul was released into God's loving arms. As one of my sisters put it, "He was a musician to the end, with his heart going from prestissimo to a peaceful adagio ending."



Up until his last moments of consciousness, Harry retained his sense of humor, communicating with his eyes when he could no longer speak. As he grew weaker, he found it more and more difficult to find things to smile about, but several days after he had stopped eating and drinking and was too weak even to move, a phone call from a special friend who said something funny to him brought one final weak chuckle. And when he experienced a brief surge of energy the day before he fell into a coma, I asked another friend to quickly bring his dog, Caesar, over for a visit. When that big, fluffy white dog walked through the bedroom door, Harry said softly, "Oh my goodness," and gave us his last big smile.



We mere humans couldn't make him smile then, but his deep love of dogs and the memory of our own beloved Ginger (*left*), who we lost in 1986, did the trick. After that, he simply closed his eyes and did not open them again. Harry was adamant about not having a formal service, but a day before he died, we took solace in the private service we held in the bedroom, led by the Hospice chaplain, who read two Psalms of my choice (100 and 103). Although Harry was in a coma by then, we believe he heard our special prayers for him, and I hope he appreciated the loving, humorous memories of him each of us shared at that time. I know he would have laughed uproariously at our off-key rendering of *Amazing*

*Grace*, which we all agreed was "amazingly graceless." Nevertheless, this unusual service gave us a lot of comfort.

## Selecting an Urn



**IT WAS HARRY'S WISH** to be cremated without fanfare, and I respected his wishes. He never requested it, but I decided to send him off with a pair of drumsticks in his hands. I dressed him in clothes he liked to wear and stuck a red handkerchief in his pocket, which he was never without at home. After looking at urns in the crematory's catalog that cost a small fortune and didn't seem special enough for Harry, I chose to have his ashes returned to me in a special box he had kept on his chest of drawers for 25 years.

A Civil War buff, Harry really treasured that box—one that I'd lovingly crafted for him as a birthday gift shortly after we were married. It is wood-burned and hand-painted with a picture of the famous little Civil War drummer boy on top and illustrations of Civil War camp life and cannons on the sides. I've been told that this may be one of the most unusual urns anyone has ever had.

I used to joke with Harry that I was going to put his ashes in the brass spittoon he once bought at a crafts fair, the one he asked the maker to engrave for him (*pictured at right*). On the bottom it says, "Old saloon drummers never die . . . they just take their drum and beat it."



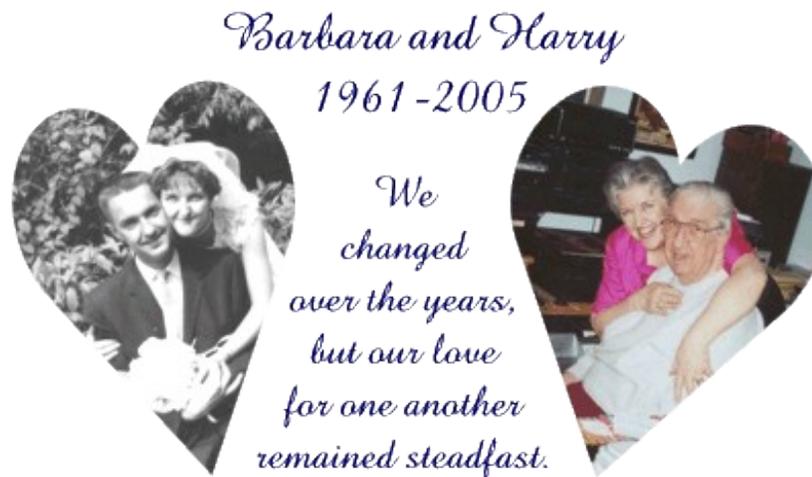
Actually, that was my humorous suggestion for his tombstone many years earlier, except that he refined it by adding "saloon" drummer (something he once was). I thought then that Harry would be very happy to know that he was going to be near me always in his very special box, which I still keep on the chest of drawers that was always his.



**I LOVE THIS PHOTO** of Harry waving goodbye. It's hard to see in this snapshot, but he made a cane for himself out of PVC pipe, which brought a lot of comments every time he went out. He got even more praise for it when Christmas rolled around and he decided to wrap the cane with red and green ribbons. He was creative in so many ways ...

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## **PART IV: Life as Mrs. Harry Brabec**



**HARRY WAS ALWAYS** a risk-taker in both his daily and professional lives—a daring improviser who lived for the moment and rarely worried about the future. Impetuous, gregarious, and sharp-witted, he always saw the funny side of any situation and was quick to share his humorous quips with me or anyone else who happened to be within earshot. He appreciated fine art, handmade products, and good cooking, especially mine. (I never saw him say no to any new dish set before him anywhere in the world, but he couldn't abide marshmallows.)



An avid reader who always had a stack of books on his night stand waiting to be read, Harry also subscribed to several newspapers, magazines, and newsletters, and he was constantly clipping something from them to add to one of his many scrapbooks, all the while listening to music from his eclectic collection of tapes, LPs, and CDs. Even when he was no longer playing professionally, his life was wrapped in music, and his tastes ran from classical and easy listening to big bands, marching bands, and circus music to instrumentals, percussion, and vocals. All the while he lay in a coma during the last days of his life, I kept the music playing in the belief that he was hearing it and being comforted by it.

**MY LIFE WITH HARRY** was often filled with financial uncertainty due to his being a freelance musician and entrepreneur, but it was always jam-packed with love, adventure, music, travel, laughter, surprise, and romance.

We met on a blind date in front of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago on Sunday, August 8, 1961 after a friend suggested he just call me to set up a blind date. "How will I know you?" I asked, and he said, "Just look for a guy who looks like the last of the Mohicans who's wearing baggy pants and has a rose in his teeth."

With only 22 cents in cash and a check from the Chicago Symphony in his pocket, he had taken a risk by inviting me to dinner in hopes that I could find someone on a Sunday night who would cash the check (which I did). In just ten minutes' time, I knew he was impatient like me, blunt and to the point, delightfully charming, witty, very sentimental, and absolutely nuts.



We had four dates in a row, and on the way home from the fourth one he astonished me by saying, "Incidentally, I'm going to marry you. You might be thinking about it a little bit. I'll call you for lunch tomorrow." All in one breath.

"You're nuts," I said.

He gave me a grin and said, "You might as well get used to it."

We were married two weeks later, and we would have been married 44 years in August 2005. Once, when we were making up titles for our imagined autobiographies, Harry picked for himself, "The World is Round, But I Am Square." And he had it right when he said a fitting epitaph for him might be, "He was always difficult, but he never was a bore."

What I'll remember most about Harry as I grow older is that he looked into my heart when we first met and saw all the things I believed no man would ever try to know. We were faithful to one another, and I knew he loved me with every fiber of his being, even when life got him down and he couldn't always show it. One of his main goals in life was to make me and other people laugh,

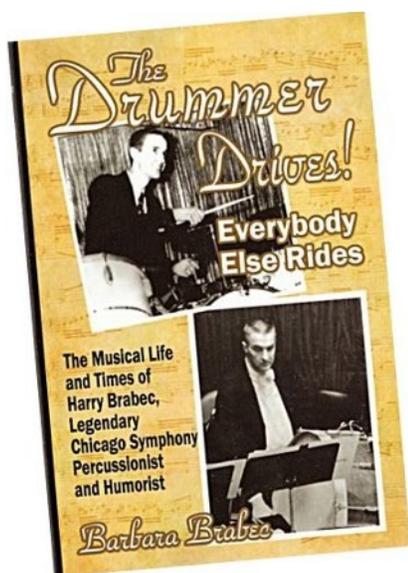
and he taught me and many others to always look for the funny side of life. Harry truly was the last of a dying breed. He will be missed by many, but none more than me.

## The Story behind This Story

**THIS STORY**—this special remembrance of my husband—first appeared in different form on seven pages of my website about five days after Harry died. My sisters were with me when he passed, and they immediately began to take care of things that needed to be done and let me do what I felt compelled to do the next day—which was go to the computer and create those web pages in memory of him and my life with him. Later I would understand how much this creative writing and website work had helped me get through the grieving process. I still can't believe that I was able to pull all the music history and details in this story together in only a few days, but this work forced me to focus on Harry and not on myself and how I was feeling about my loss. (*I would journal reams about that later.*)

After several years of being Harry's caregiver, I was now seeing him with new eyes and remembering all the happy times we'd had together. I wanted to honor him and let everyone know he was a very unusual man of considerable accomplishment, especially since he'd died believing he was a failure. (*That story is told in my memoir (below), which I published five years later.*)

I was helped even more when I started to get emails from readers who were touched by my writing. Now that I've put this story in a PDF document, my hope is that readers will not only share it, but think about someone they've loved and lost that they need to memorialize in some special way. If this describes you, I hope my story will inspire you to write the story only YOU can tell.



**A Compelling, Enriching Read.** "*The Drummer Drives!* is far more than a widow's tribute to her departed husband. It is a living relic of a now lost musical age; a menagerie of musings on love, fate, mankind's inter-connectedness, and the vacuity of widowhood."

– Adam Kolczynski, Managing Editor and author at Polybius Books

**MANY OF HARRY'S LETTERS** and a wealth of his original humor will be found in [The Drummer Drives! Everybody Else Rides](#)—*The Musical Life and Times of Harry Brabec, Legendary Chicago Symphony Percussionist and Humorist* (2010). Available in print and Kindle editions on Amazon, as a Nook eBook, and by special order in bookstores.

[CLICK HERE](#) for detailed information about *The Drummer Drives!*, including links to the book's Table of Contents and excerpts from a few of the many five-star reviews on Amazon.

## Related Articles

For more information about Harry's unusual life, work, and humor—and a fascinating overview of Chicago's music entertainment scene between 1940 and the mid-nineties, see the [MUSIC articles archives](#), which include:

- [Drumming with the Chuck Foster Orchestra](#). Harry Brabec's remembrances of working with this band and its members, with a link to the amusing, last-surviving 1940s video soundie of the Chuck Foster Orchestra on YouTube.
- [Men on Courting Girls in 1946](#). A humorous interview with members of the Chuck Foster Orchestra when Harry was the band's drummer and they were playing the Blackhawk Hotel in Chicago. Includes photo and copy of 1946 newspaper column.

## Your feedback to this writing is invited.

**IF YOU KNEW HARRY** or would like to comment on this writing, I would love to hear from you. [Email me here](#). Be sure to include your phone number when you write, along with your time zone. I'd like to have to have the opportunity to call you if I want to continue the discussion. – Barbara

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**BARBARA LAUNCHED** BarbaraBrabec.com in 2000 and quickly began to populate it with home-business articles and resources. Over the years she added hundreds of articles on several other topics related in one way or another to the larger topic of LIFE.



Now, LIFE itself is Barbara's focus. Unlike her original website, her new domain launched in 2021 features only her own writing—new content and an archive of timeless and relevant articles in fourteen life-related categories, all updated and reformatted for republication on the all-new "[Barbara Brabec's World](#)." It reflects Barbara's current writing interests, latest books, and professional services.

Visit the [ARTICLES Table of Contents](#) to see article categories of possible interest to you and join her mailing list to receive her email *Brabec Bulletin* blog posts.

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