

Sabrina Lewins

1st July 1937 - 17th January 2025

Artist, writer, mother, sister, friend

*Loved and missed by
her children Lloyd, Eugene and Shelagh,
her grandchildren Emma, Lloyd, David and Andrew
And all her many friends
For her kindness, lightness of spirit, creativity and joy in life*



Unitarian Church, 5 Emmanuel Road, Cambridge CB1 1JW
Celebration of life
Thursday 6th February 2025 at 1.00 pm

Biography

New England: 1st July 1937 - 11th September 1959

Sabrina was born in Salem, Massachusetts. Her parents were Lloyd Joel Moss and Florence Moss, née Poirier. Kathleen, as she was christened, and her older brother Gaylord were very close, partly due to their long spell in hospital together as children. On their recovery, father Lloyd bought a sailing boat and took the family out on sailing trips from The Willows yacht club, and for long walks - with a dog whenever he could borrow one!



Florence Moss, Al Poirier?, Phil Poirier (brothers of Florence), Kathleen (Sabrina) Moss and Gaylord Moss.

Gaylord was always expected to go to college, being a brilliant engineer, but there was no expectation of Sabrina doing the same. However she won a scholarship to Massachusetts College of Art and studied there from 1955 until 1959. On her first day, a classmate asked her name and she said “Kathleen but I don’t like it” and he said “What would you like to be called” and she said “I always liked the name Sabrina”, and he immediately introduced her to everyone as Sabrina.



Sabrina in 1959

She met her first husband Jeffery David Lewins, an English army officer in the Royal Engineers, at a party in Boston, where they sang Gilbert and Sullivan songs together. Jeffery was on a sabbatical from the army doing his PhD in nuclear engineering (civil) at MIT. They were married on the 6th of February 1959 at Grace Church, Salem. On her wedding day she admitted to Jeffery that her name was legally Kathleen and he insisted that Sabrina be put on the wedding certificate. "I'm marrying Sabrina not Kathleen".



Sabrina on her wedding day, 1959

English life: 11th September 1959 - January 1980

Sabrina and Jeffery moved to England and lived with Jeffery's mother, Jessie Lewins, in a cottage in the Gloucestershire village of Meysey Hampton. This was a hard transition. Not only was Sabrina parted from her close-knit family, but conditions in England were comparatively basic - it was not that long since the end of the war. Life as an army wife was very different from that of a Boston art student.

The family moved around in the 1960s because of Jeffery's army postings, first to Osnabrück, Germany shortly after their first son Lloyd Jeffery's birth on the 16th July 1960. They returned to England and their second son Eugene was born on the 10th May 1962, in Camberley. From 1962 to 1964 they lived in Glasgow, then in 1964 travelled on the HMS Queen Mary to the USA where Jeffery taught at the University of Washington. From 1965 - 1968 the Lewins family lived in Hohne, (then West) Germany where Jeffery commanded 2 Armoured Engineer Squadron. Their daughter Shelagh Christine Lewins was born on the 13th January 1967.

In 1969, Jeffery left the army and took up a job as a university lecturer and the warden of the newly built Hughes Parry Hall of Residence in London. Sabrina focused most of her energy on raising three challenging children, but also made friends and worked as a secretary. These were exciting times, living in Bloomsbury and visiting galleries, concerts, the Royal Institution Christmas Lectures, in between wrangling her children into an education. Sabrina's parents visited many times including her famous trip with her father, Lloyd Moss, to tea at Buckingham Palace. Through the 1970s Sabrina introduced her children to art, crafts, poetry and did not forget her love of the sea and swimming. There were sailing holidays in Wales, the Norfolk Broads and camping holidays, but the canal holidays were maybe the best, where even the task of cooking for a hungry family was enlivened by watching the landscape passing by the window.



Sabrina Lewins and Lloyd Moss on their way to Buckingham Palace for Queen Elizabeth II's garden party



Jeffery Lewins, Shelagh Lewins, Florence Moss, Eugene Lewins, Sabrina Lewins, Gaylord Moss, Lloyd Lewins and Lloyd Moss in the Norfolk Broads, early 1970s



Jeffery Lewins and Sabrina Lewins at Florence and Lloyd Moss's 50th wedding anniversary, in California, 1979

Cambridge: January 1980 - January 2024

Sabrina, Jeffery and Shelagh moved to Cambridge when Jeffery left Hughes Parry Hall and got a job as a lecturer at the University, later becoming a fellow of Magdalene College. Lloyd and Eugene were by now at London and Cambridge universities. Sabrina had several jobs including working at a home for recovering alcoholics but in November 1983 she found the role which brought her so much happiness and wonderful friendships, as Secretary to various senior members of the Open University, at Cintra House on Hills Road. She threw herself into OU life and was a stalwart of St Brian's Day when the "grownups" were annually away at summer school and the hard-working staff left in Cambridge could let their hair down with games, dressing up and a picnic.



Sabrina at her Open University office in Cintra House, 1986

Sabrina's sons Lloyd and Eugene continued the family tradition of migration (her brother and parents had moved to Los Angeles) and relocated to the United States where their children were born. Sabrina deeply loved Lloyd's children, David and Andrew, and Eugene's children, Emma and Lloyd James. Their times together were extremely precious to her. (Lloyd now lives in Thailand, showing that the Moss streak of adventure is alive and well!)

Sabrina continued to express herself artistically, through painting, writing, pottery and gardening. She loved dancing and took great pleasure in Circle Dancing sessions, besides practising yoga and tai chi. And books! Always books!

Sabrina and Jeffery's marriage ended in 1990 and she lived in rented rooms until she was able to buy her house in Charles Street where she transformed the garden from a sloping scrap of lawn into a haven of sheltered outdoor rooms overhung with trees and flowers. Sabrina became closely involved with the Unitarian Church and after retiring from the OU in 1998 she volunteered at Headway, a charity that helps people with brain injuries. Here she led activities with the clients and played the Japanese board game Go and the Five Letter Word game (similar to Wordle but with paper and pencil).



Sabrina in the Pacific, at Venice Beach, California, 1991



Sabrina in Hawaii, 1992

It was characteristic that when Sabrina's hearing deteriorated, she took classes in lipreading and helped to raise awareness of how to help people with hearing difficulties to participate in communities.

Sabrina's second marriage was to John Innes Coates on 9th April 2006. They enjoyed happy years including sunny holidays on the island of Formentera where Sabrina was able to reconnect with the sea, this time the Mediterranean instead of the chilly Atlantic or North Sea! In 2020 that marriage also ended with divorce.



Wanwisa Lewins (daughter-in-law), Sabrina Lewins, Lloyd Lewins, October 2022

Sabrina developed new health problems including vertigo attacks and memory issues, later diagnosed as Alzheimer's, but she still loved reading, art and gardens, and would walk to the local park just to take the air and watch people go by.



Sabrina eating ice cream at Bedouin restaurant in Cambridge, August 2023



Shelagh Lewins and Sabrina Lewins, Cambridge, October 2024

Sabrina moved into Heathlands House Care Home in September 2023. This was another unsettling transition for Sabrina, and she missed family life deeply although at no time did she miss planning and cooking meals. After three children and two husbands, she had had enough of the kitchen! Sabrina was supported by her many loving friends, of whom Angela, Patricia and Anabela stand out in particular. The staff at Heathlands House did everything possible to enrich Sabrina's life and welcome her friends and family who continued to spend precious time with her. Sabrina had many happy times in the last year of her life, enjoying trips to the seaside, perambulating in the garden with her bears, meals out, walks in parks - and she always kept her glorious smile.

Sabrina became ill in November 2024 after a difficult hernia repair surgery, and passed away peacefully at Heathlands House with her son Lloyd by her side.

Reflections

from Eugene Lewins

Sabrina was dearly loved as a mother to her children and as a loyal friend to many.

In her presence, you always felt unique and special. She paid attention to you and celebrated whatever was unfolding in your life and hopes and plans. It was a kind of sunshine of love. When you parted, you felt recharged in the value and significance of whatever it was you were doing. I hiked the length of the John Muir Trail, three weeks in the wilderness, and as I was leaving Sabrina wrote me a tender poem of her hopes for me, sentiments that accompanied and encouraged me every step of the way. She often used her creative skills to highlight others and strengthen the bonds of community, such as her series of fantastical stories about Blume for her Church. Her paintings celebrated places meaningful to her family.

Perhaps this commitment to supporting others put her in a secondary role in her own life, and made it challenging for her in her marriages to pursue her own fullness as an individual. I like to think that her creation of her own beautiful home on Charles Street in Cambridge, a welcome place for so many friends to stop by, was a chapter in her life that enabled something of this blossoming, as did her professional contributions to Headway and the Open University.

I suspect that mum always felt inside that she was still something of that child from small town Salem, Massachusetts, not quite sure if she would fully overcome her significant health challenges and be able to live a full adult life, and was therefore somewhat in awe of the actual life she was living, crossing continents at first by boat and then by plane, living through phases of world history, from cold war Germany to 70's London, living amongst intellectuals who she had imagined would always be distant figures on a podium.

Maybe that was part of the joy she brought so many people, she didn't take them for granted and helped each of us see through new eyes the miracle of our own lives and journeys.

Throughout all of this, including profound personal challenges, Sabrina brought a graciousness that softened, sweetened and touched the world around her. She made a difference in our world.



Sabrina Lewins and Eugene Lewins, Heathlands House, September 2023

Sabrina's Creativity

Sea Gulls

Hear the lonely cry,
As the gulls wing by,
To the land lost in the sea.
Where the fresh salt air,
Blows everywhere,
And the waves toss wild and free.
Where the sunbeams sing
And the sea weeds cling
And the waves toss wild with foam,
Then the sun sinks low
In the evening glow,
As the gulls soar swiftly home.

Sabrina Lewins, circa 1940



Sail lofts at Tollesbury, Essex. Painted by Sabrina Lewins in the 1970s or 1980s

Blume's Garden Surprise

Between 2002 and 2004, Sabrina wrote and illustrated a series of stories about Blume, the blue knitted mouse at the Unitarian church in Cambridge. The stories featured scenes and characters from the Church, including the tiny church garden which Sabrina helped to renovate and make beautiful.

"Isn't the garden pretty today," Squeaky said, "I love to look at all the bright flowers and green leaves with busy beetles and ants running about among them." "And the butterflies" said Hoppy. "It's such fun to watch them dipping and gliding between the flowers."

Blume sighed a big, sad sigh. "I wish I could see the garden" he said. "It's nice here in church and I know we have flowers every week, but the garden sounds so much more exciting."

Squeaky and Hoppy were very sorry to have made their friend feel sad. They began to think and think about how they could get Blume into the garden.



“We couldn’t drag him through the hole we use to get in and out of the church because he’s too big, and anyway he’d get all dirty” said Squeaky.

“And if we tried to carry him out through the door, people would see us” said Hoppy.

Suddenly he had a brilliant idea. “We must get Blume down to the floor among the chairs” he cried. They pushed and carried him until soon Blume was leaning against a chair leg, wondering if he would ever see the beautiful church garden. At that moment, Reverend Andrews came through the door whistling one of his favourite hymns and carrying a small table that had been borrowed from the church. He set it down, then took off his jacket and hung it on a chair because he was feeling very warm and he needed to move some of the chairs into a circle. As he worked, he mumbled to himself “What will I write my sermon about this week? I just can’t seem to think of anything I really want to talk about. Well, I’ll just have to sit in the garden for a while and hope some ideas come to me.”

“Oh” said Squeaky.” Quick, Hoppy, help me get Blume into the minister’s jacket pocket”.

They pushed Blume away from the chair leg and carefully lifted him up to the pocket that was hanging down near the floor. A good push, and he was inside with only his tail dangling out, but there was no time to push that in too because Reverend Andrews had finished moving chairs and was striding over to get his jacket. He swept it over his arm while the two little mice hid behind the chair legs, and hoped that he wouldn’t see Blume’s tail. Out of the church he went, whistling again, past the garden and into his study to fetch paper and pens to write his sermon with.

“I wonder”, he said to himself, “should I leave my jacket in the office or will I feel cool? There is a bit of a breeze. Perhaps I’ll just take it with me in case I need it.” He strolled into the garden where he sat on the bench, stretched his legs out in front of him and draped his jacket over the back of the bench. Poor Blume was upside down in the jacket pocket in the dark, with his tail hanging out.

“Goodness, what’s this?” said Reverend Andrews, suddenly noticing a bright blue tail hanging from his pocket. He reached inside the pocket and pulled out Blume. What a surprise he got! “However did he get in there?” exclaimed the minister. “Well, now that he’s here, he can sit beside me to keep me company while I try to write my sermon.”

Reverend Andrews sat Blume beside him on the bench and Blume at last could look out across the garden at the waving flowers and leaves and the busy insects. Oh it was wonderful and he felt so happy. I think his happiness was so strong that even the minister began to feel it. “Ah,” he said, “there’s something about sharing a beautiful place with someone else that makes it twice as good. Even the first man, Adam, wanted someone to share the Garden of Eden with, so they say. Well, I can write my sermon about how we need good friends to share our joys and sorrows with, and how we in our church can be such friends to one another. Yes, that is what I’ll write about.”



Blume just sat and stared happily at the garden all afternoon, and when the minister carried him back into the church at tea time, he was all warm from the sun and smelled of fresh air and flowers. Hoppy and Squeaky greeted him with delight and from then on they could all talk about the garden together. When Reverend Andrews gave his sermon on Sunday, he placed Blume in front of him and smiled as he said “I had a little help writing my sermon this week from a friend who dropped by unexpectedly and shared a beautiful afternoon with me in the church garden.”

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You can read all of Sabrina's Blume stories online at
https://www.shelaghlewins.com/other_stuff/sabrina.php



A selection of Sabrina's handmade pottery

Old Man And Birds

An old man now, my rumpled clothes have bulging pockets
of brown paper bags containing
peanuts, seeds and crumbs.

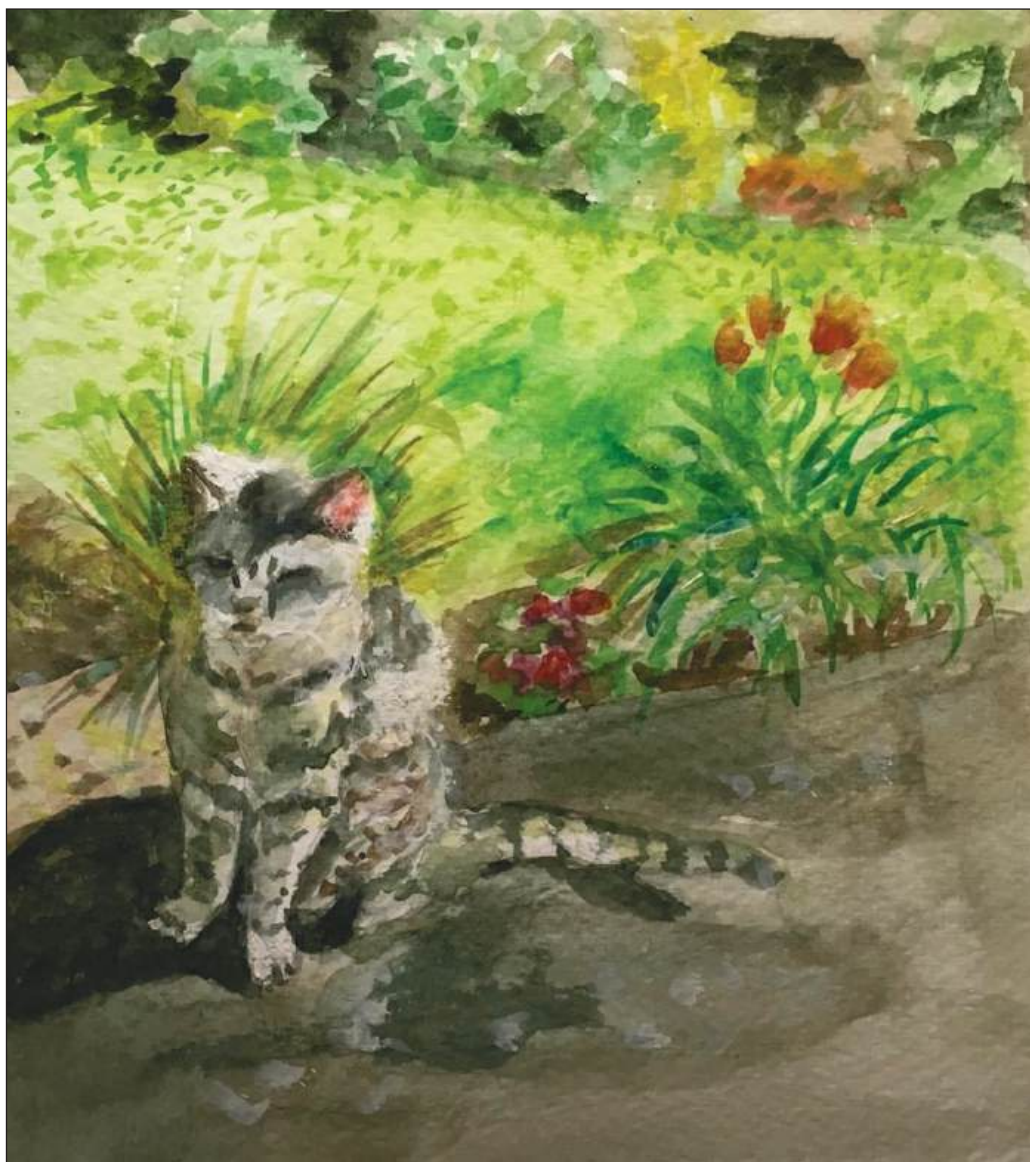
In the park, pigeons gather round me,
sitting on my outstretched hands, my shoulders, my head.
Pecking food I have placed there for them.

I walk slowly, a king among minions,
watched by solemn children and busy mothers,
who throw crumbs to ducks. Surprised by my appearance they
follow me with their eyes.

An old man now, I shuffle along with my birdy friends,
Grey city birds, not upper class folk I assure you,
but glad of my company, as I of theirs.

And would you wonder to know,
that inside me lives yet that dreaming boy
who lay in summer long ago
in a field so sweet with scents and swaying grasses,
That even the cries of skylarks high above, wheeling round and round in the sky
Did not dissuade him from thinking this was heaven.

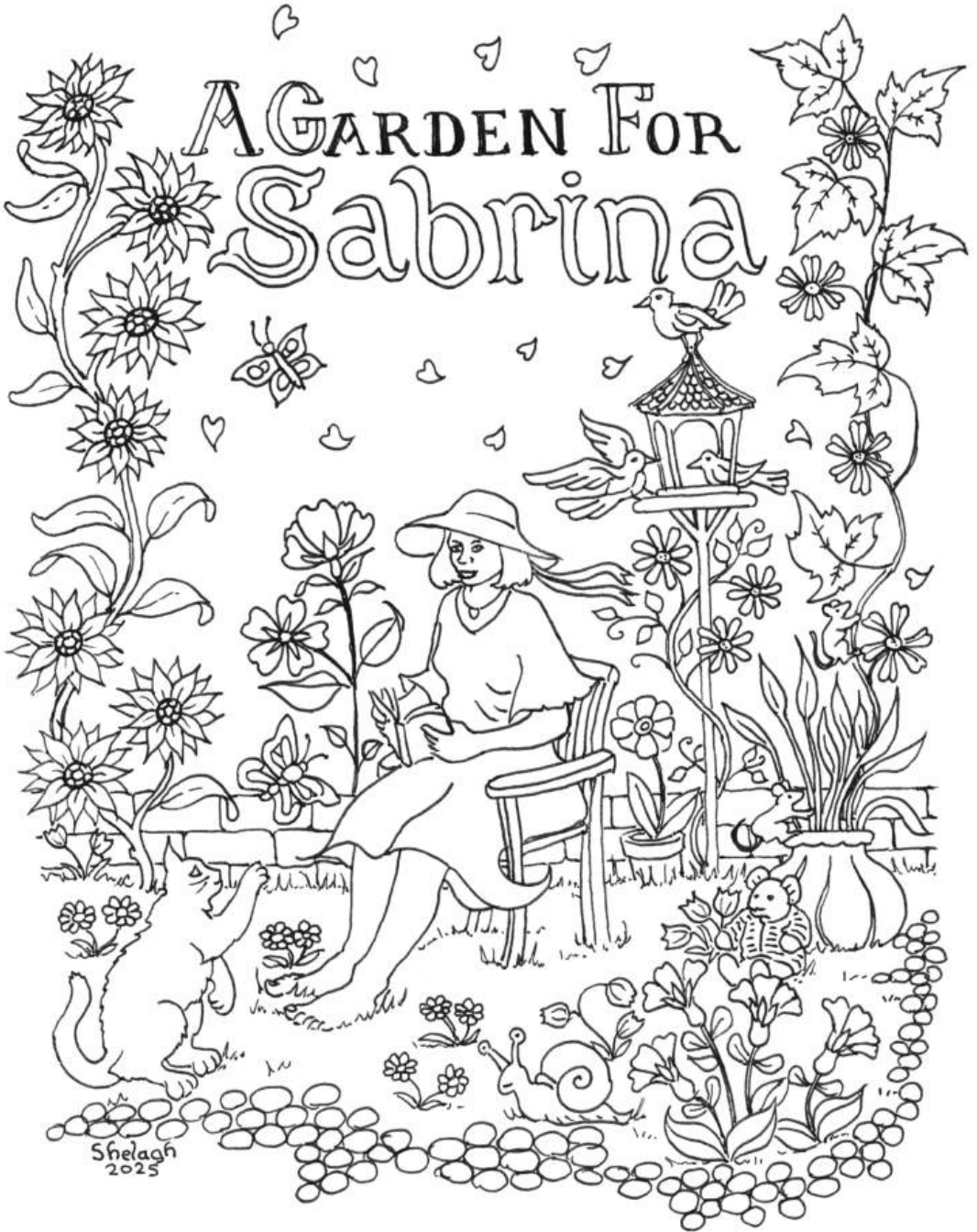
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Purdie in the garden, probably early 2000s

In her later years, Sabrina would take her pencils and colouring book of garden pictures with her to Warm Spaces at St Phillips, or the common room. You may like to colour this picture and think of Sabrina in a garden full of flowers.

A GARDEN FOR Sabrina



Shelagh
2025



Sabrina Lewins, river Cam, June 2024



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