



'Live one day at a time. Keep your sense of humor. Don't quit fighting to live...and put your faith fully in God...' - Ross Baumgardner

No Sad Songs

Death Is No Stranger To C. Ross Baumgardner

By ELIZABETH STEWART
Staff Writer

Sleep wouldn't come. His mind raced; too many questions.

He slipped quietly from his sleeping wife's side and shuffled out into the warm night air. He stared at the darkness until the familiar landscape took shape. He listened to night sounds, a light breeze caressing the tree tops. Then he lifted his eyes. Stars sparkled in relief at Heaven's gateway.

C. Ross Baumgardner's world had collapsed. Bitterness scalded his throat and frustration, like a greasy bubble, was lodged there. In his bitterness and frustration, Ross screamed aloud at the stars—"Why me, Lord?"

Only hours before Ross had learned his multiple sclerosis, a disease that attacks the central nervous system, was not in remission.

Unless there is remission a MS victim dies by inches after gradually being reduced to total helplessness.

"Why me, Lord?"

The question all may ask when given the same news.

Ross was 44-years old. He had a wife, a son, a daughter. He had his dream home and a job he loved. He had spent 21 years as a flight engineer and crew chief in the U.S. Navy. He had it all and the future was bright ahead of him.

"Why me, Lord?" he screamed. And then he felt the tears running down his cheeks and he said, "Why not me, Lord?"

Ross had already walked and talked with his Lord, but since that warm night last March he walks even closer. His unquestioning faith has sustained him.

He needed it. The doctor gave Ross seven months at best.

He has spent the time counseling his family, getting his legal papers in order - and planning his funeral services.

The latter was not difficult, because Ross holds licenses of funeral director and embalmer earned at Gupton Jones School of Embalming in Atlanta. Death was no stranger to Ross. While in service he was casualty assistance officer and served as military escort for bereaved service families. His natural manner with the bereaved caused several funeral directors to encourage his thinking about becoming a director himself when he retired from the Navy.

Ross retired from service in May 1972 and settled his family on the seven-acre farm off Waco Rd., found for him by a local realtor. He really had no plans to do anything for awhile after retirement, except perhaps "go fishing."

He was idle for one month, during which both his pastor, Rev. W.A. Costner, and Ollie Harris encouraged him to enter mortician school and go to work.

Ross went to work for Carothers Funeral Home in Gastonia, taking night calls, living at the funeral home and then attending Gupton Jones in Atlanta.

His work at funerals, his obvious concern for the families of the deceased placed him in good stead with Carothers. He had no reason to believe he was not set in a career he loved.

But his right leg ached. Gradually it became more unsteady.

While in the Navy Ross had fallen and injured the right knee. There was an operation to repair damaged cartilage and ligaments and it had

healed as expected according to doctors.

"The ache just wouldn't go away," Ross said, "and I would stagger occasionally. That was embarrassing during a funeral service. So I went to see a doctor, had the leg x-rayed. It showed nothing."

Ross continued to work, but he realized it was taking him longer and longer each time to complete the embalming operation. And he found he had to cling to the table to steady himself.

Other signs showed up. His fingertips were gradually losing all feeling and he would spill things at the dinner table.

"It was embarrassing," Ross said, "I had finished second in my embalming class and it was getting harder and harder to do my job. I used to work for two hours and rest 15 minutes. Then after 15 minutes of work I was ready to rest for two hours. I had no duration in my leg."

Ross saw two more doctors and the third suggested a physical therapist.

"The therapy actually did make the muscle in my right leg stronger than my left," Ross said, "but still there was no duration. My foot droop was worse. That was started in the Navy. I call it that because my foot would drag, toe first, when I took a step."

It was the therapist who first alerted Ross to what he might have.

"The therapist said it was either polio or MS," Ross said. "But said that I would have to check that out with my doctor. I did. I had the doctor do the same thing the therapist had - press firmly on the bottom of my right foot while the leg was stretched out on a table."

The result was pathological leg tremors - uncontrollable leg movement. The doctor said "either polio or MS" and referred Ross to a neurologist in Winston-Salem.

The tests confirmed MS. During his talks with the neurologist, Ross recalled an incident that happened to him once while he was on leave from the Navy. He went blind in his left eye and was hospitalized at Portsmouth Naval Hospital for tests and treatment. The sight returned as quickly as it had vanished and there was no medical explanation for either.

"Not at that time, anyway," Ross said. "Now I know the sudden loss and return of the sight was another early symptom of multiple sclerosis."

The neurologist told Ross neither his emaciated right leg, the lack of muscular duration nor the numbness in his fingers would kill him. "With MS the fatality occurs when the disease attacks a primary organ that sustains life functions - circulatory and respiratory systems," Ross was told.

"He said the important thing is to get the disease into remission," Ross said. "I told the neurologist I was going back to work and work as long as I could. He told me to come to him when I knew I could no longer work."

Ross made that trip last December.

"My leg just won't do what my brain tells it to and my hands are numb and my speech is starting to slur..." Ross told the neurologist.

"Is that all you've got to tell me?" With tears in his eyes, emotion in his voice, Ross blurted it out...

"I can't do my damn job anymore!!"

The pressures increased for Ross. He could no longer work, he was clumsy at the table, he found it increasingly difficult to do even the most elemental things. These things were of little consequence to others, but in Ross' mind these were large scale disasters.

One of the pleasures he had most enjoyed was the evening walks with his animals down to the stream running through his property. The last time he was there his leg buckled and he sprawled in the water. Slowly, painfully and tearfully he pulled himself over the ground with unfeeling hands to get home.

"Why not me, Lord?"

And since that March night when Ross found an inner peace and prayed, while his family slept, for

the wisdom to help them through their ordeal, he has faced up to both life and death.

"I live one day at a time," he said. "I take the good with the bad. Sometimes I want people around me. I want to talk, laugh, sing. And sometimes I rage, cry and shout. I will not answer the phone. I don't want any decisions demanded of me."

But you don't quit living! "You carry on," Ross said. "You have to. I think more than myself, this situation has taken greater toll on my family. In whatever way I'm capable I am trying to make them understand they must go on. My son, Rusty, has qualified for admission to the U.S. Naval Academy, so I am happy he has a lead on his own future. My daughter, Tracy will be a senior next fall at Kings Mountain High School. Mona, my wife, has her work as a beautician."

Another way he has planned to make his passing easier on his family is the type of service he wants. "I want no full military funeral, no taps played. I have seen the effect this has on families. It is agonizing."

Ross wanted to tell his story because it might help other families going through the same or a similar crisis. He has advice for the person with the terminal illness:

"Listen to your doctor. Sit down with your family and bring it all out in the open. Explain what the illness involves and what physical and mental problems it can evoke. Don't allow yourself to become a scapegoat in family confrontations because of your illness. Live one day at a time. Keep your sense of humor, don't quit fighting to live and - most importantly - put your faith fully in God."

Reed Graduates

Dr. Charles Nathan Reed, son of Dr. and Mrs. N.H. Reed of Kings Mountain, was graduated recently from the School of Medicine at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

He will begin his postgraduate training in Internal Medicine at Charlotte Memorial Hospital July 1.

At UNC-Ch, Dr. Reed was active in Chapel Hill SHAC Clinic, and on the UNC School of Medicine Admissions committee.

He attended Kings Mountain High School and completed pre-medical studies at the University of North Carolina.

Mrs. Reed is the former Jill Fisher of Pendleton.



DR. CHARLES REED

Hospital Clears Hurdle

The next step in the proposed renovation program at Kings Mountain Hospital cleared another hurdle Monday in a meeting of the Cleveland County Board of Commissioners.

Commissioners voted that a \$5 million renovation of the hospital may proceed to the next stage.

Administrator Grady Howard said the program calls for no new beds. To correct for what hospital officials term as inadequate room space, 35 beds will be eliminated. They will be replaced, said Howard, with a 35 bed third floor above the newest section of the hospital. All will be turned into private rooms. Howard said the proposed \$10.34

per day per patient increase in rates would retire 30-year revenue bonds to finance the project. Present private room rates range from \$73 to \$75 per day.

Commission Chairman Jack Palmer, Jr. said he questioned the large amount of money being spent for a project which would not increase bed capacity but the commission endorsed the project, voting to send to the state a certificate of need application.

Kings Mountain Mayor John Moss told the board that the city commission has endorsed the project and Howard told the board that hospital trustees are 100 percent behind the project.

Horse Show Set

It will be horse show time again at Kings Mountain Saddle Club on Sat., June 23, beginning at 11 a.m. and continuing through the day and evening with intermission from 5 to 6 p.m.

Forty-four classes of beautiful show horses will be judged, with competition for English, Western and Game horses. Judges for the event will be David Bradley, Hickory, English, and Bob McCartha, Chapin, S.C., Western. High

point trophies will be awarded in each of the three divisions and points accumulated will be credited toward the Year End High Point Awards which will be given at the end of the September show.

Kings Mountain Saddle Club is located off Waco Rd. north of Kings Mountain, and further information may be obtained by calling (704) 739-2108. Phone show day only is 739-7208.