

Triumph over Tragedy

By

Jean Agnew (Gerry Bertier's mother) 1953 – 1981

Gerry was coming from the T.C Williams High School football banquet in December 1971. The seas had been the best year of Gerry's life. He had just been awarded the MOST VALUABLE PLAYER AWARD and his team, "The Titans" had won the state championship. Three Alexandria, VA schools had integrated into one. George Washington was almost all black, Hammond was almost all white and T.C Williams was mixed. From this came an enormous explosion of talent for the football team. There was bitterness at first among the players especially when a black coach was appointed head coach and Hammond's coach was white and had seniority. With the leadership and determination of the coaches forcing them to become respectful of one another they were considered the best team Alexandria and the state of Virginia had ever seen.

Gerry was the Defensive Captain and leader. He was macho enough and popular enough for the team mates to listen when he stood before them and said, "There is no black or white – we are a team." He became best friends with one of the black team mates. Julius Campbell and Gerry Bertier were an example for the team, school and city. The players monitored the halls in their football jerseys and broke up any disputes. The team was undefeated and was celebrated at home and, since beyond. They were second in the nation and the movie "Remember the Titans" was a true story of that team. Gerry was always before the press and the media was constantly interviewing him.

This is the rest of his story. He had borrowed my new camaro and went to the local fast food restaurant with several friends after the banquet, where he had been honored. He drove them home and he himself was on the way home (only 6 blocks away) when the car went out of control. It hit a fire hydrant, which made an upward gush, flooding the area. It then hit a school flashing light sign (which was solid with concrete filling.) The sign was twisted into an L shape which careened the car across the road facing the wrong direction forcing the car into a ditch.

My husband (Gerry's step father) and I rushed to the hospital and found Gerry in pain. The attendant pulled down the sheet covering his chest and showed his mother "X" marks across his chest, about 2 inches below his arm pits. The seriousness of his wounds did not sink in until later. First, I had to face that this handsome, strong young man was even injured. His step father and I spent all night in the hospital waiting for any information from the Intensive Care Unit. When Gerry's condition finally stabilized they convinced us to go home. And, we did, but not without much hesitation.

It had only been 2 hours when the phone rang telling us to hurry down to sign some paperwork as Gerry was drowning in his own fluids. His lungs had been pierced by his sternum, which went into his spinal column. Gerry was paralyzed from where the "x" marks were shown to me.

Gerry had to be operated on in the X-ray room. The doctor kept coming out, to where we'd been requested to stay, because of the seriousness of Gerry's injuries. They had me sign documents to operate and this must have occurred 3 to 4 times. After doctors felt Gerry was stabilized enough they took him into the operating room. The specialist operated on his back to relieve the pressure and to hopefully have him gain some feeling below the x marks on his badly battered body.

The day after Gerry was injured the hospital switchboard was swamped. The attendants in the hospital came and told his mother the lobby was full of people concerned about Gerry. After Gerry was stabilized and resting, I went to greet everyone I could knowing they cared about my son and I knew Gerry would want that. There were at least 200 people in the lobby.

When Gerry's surgery had ended I had been heading back to Gerry's room when a nurse said that there was a call from a reporter and would I take the phone call. I picked up the phone to find John Cochran (a local television reporter) and he asked me if it was true that my son wouldn't walk again. I replied that I would give him the whole story later, but I asked that he not put that statement into the news as it may hurt my son. He agreed and that he wouldn't put anything out to the public that I didn't approve of first.

Despite earnest attempts, Gerry never did regain feeling below his chest and even after spending 3 months in the Alexandria Hospital, intense treatments such as putting Gerry in a bed that turn him face down to improve his circulation, this hospital was not equipped to ether handle a long term patient nor were they trained for it. .

Gerry was so determined on recovery that he wouldn't allow me to feed him. He told me to give him the utensils and while he laid flat on his back, entangled in hoses, he fed himself. That was the independent side of Gerry. The side of Gerry I taught him to be. And, though I taught him to be brave and independent, my heart was heavy and hurting. I watched my brave son suffering and I wanted to pamper him and hold him close, I wanted to cry, my heart was breaking; but I didn't help, because I knew Gerry wanted to prove he could do it on his own.

I would hold my breath and pull in my diaphragm, compose myself and feelings and get safely down the hall before I broke down into tears. I would go home after my day and cry all night. I never thought it would do Gerry any good to see me upset or crying and I didn't think my husband needed that strain either.

One day I walked into the hospital room and Gerry was sitting in a wheelchair. I don't remember what the conversation had been about, however, Gerry replied words that ring in my ears to this date, "I don't care if I'm paralyzed. God left me with my brain and I'm going to use it to help people less fortunate." These words made this the best year of my life.

“Beyond the hospital bed”, Gerry coordinated with the Alexandria Jaycee’s a “Walk for mankind.” Gerry gathered students, adults, company executives to donate. And, when Gerry was excused from the hospital, he himself did 30 miles in his wheelchair.\

Gerry’s employment with Abbey Medical allowed him to attend wheelchair sports events all over the country. He sold their equipment and participated in the wheelchair Olympics and continued to win medals in shot put, discus and javelin.

Locally, Gerry was called by hospitals about depressed patients and he would come and do a wheelie at the end of their bed. When the patient was released he would go home with them and advise them how to do rehabilitation.

Gerry made speeches across the country to help handicapped individuals to get into buildings, worked with David Speck to widen aisles in grocery stores and check outs. Ramp curbs and widening of booths in Restaurants were included.

Because of Gerry’s great capacity to motivate, the incredulous works he performed to his fellow neighbor and those across the United States, He was presented the “President’s award”