

Tribute to Jeff Graham

(1951 - 1997)



Introduction

It is a beautiful spring day and the fifteen-foot high white dogwood is blooming in our front yard. It is a perfect wispy dogwood and it reminds me of Jeff Graham every time I see it. Jeff and Sandy gave us that “tree” in 1986, a few months after we had moved into our new home. They were building a home next to ours and the excavation had just begun on the foundation. Several large trees had been removed and the backhoe digging their basement had unearthed many small bushes and saplings.

Jeff and Sandy were at the site checking the progress of their new home and Ruth and I were working in our new yard. Jeff picked up a small dogwood sapling, without any dirt attached, and handed this stick to us as a house-

warming gift! With great fanfare, we planted the two-foot high “tree” on the spot, along with stakes and supporting cords to hold it in place. It remained like that for the entire summer...no leaves, just a small stick, supported by three cords.

More than once, friends told us, that “you have a dead tree there,” but we didn’t remove it. Jeff or I always mentioned it, while we stood in my driveway...how it took such a long time to bloom. Jeff and I could run a joke into the ground (literally) with anyone! In the spring of 1987 a miracle happened...the dogwood, known to that date (and forever) as “Jeff’s Tree,” showed off its three new leaves! This stick was alive! Jeff’s tree thrived and in several years bloomed with beautiful white flowers...and now, twenty-two years later, stands tall and proud...a living memorial to that wonderful man, arborist (ha ha) Jeff Graham.

That tree symbolizes our relationship with Sandy and Jeff. We barely knew them when both couples relocated from Kent to Twin Lakes, but like Jeff’s tree, our relationship grew and thrived. Jeff lost his life to breast cancer in 1997 at age forty-six. Sandy is still our wonderful neighbor and we have continued getting together with her, as we did her and Jeff, two or three nights each week for a drink before dinner. We love Sandy as we loved Jeff and in this tribute I want to tell you a few stories about this wonderful man that you might not know. I want you to know him better...and to never forget him.

The Early Years

Jeff is the most free-spirited friend I have ever had. He always seemed to live in the moment...and to enjoy life. He knew everything that was going on in Kent! He went to the post office each morning around 9:30 and met all the locals picking up their mail. They exchanged the local news (and some gossip) so Jeff always knew what was happening. If Ruth or I would bring something up, "I hear the Jones are moving to Indiana," he would pick up his phone and check that out with a friend. "Yes," he would say, "they are moving there in August."

He was on top of everything! We joked that he never worked, as he went to work about 9:00, came home for lunch around 11:30 and then worked from 1:30 to 3:30, when he got home in time to greet Sandy from her teaching job. (Of course, he worked other hours as a realtor and insurance agent, but we never stopped teasing him.)

When they moved in a few months later. He asked me why I mowed my own lawn... "Can't you afford to have your lawn mowed?" When I told him that I enjoyed mowing the lawn and planned to do it as long as I was able, he scoffed. But soon, he purchased a rider mower and commenced doing the yard work he swore he would never do. Seeing and hearing Jeff mow his lawn would be a You Tube hit.

His long legs stuck out to each side of the steering wheel and he never stopped for a stick or a stone. He zipped

around the yard with abandon...chewing up sticks and breaking large stones into small ones. Our grandson, Andrew, two-years old, was living with us at the time, and the moment Ruth heard Jeff's mower start she would always say, "Get Andrew in the house." Jeff continued this practice until all of his large stones were manageable.

In keeping with Jeff always needing to be in the forefront of local news and cutting edge information techniques, he wanted to be one of the first to have a mobile phone. In the late 1980's, mobile phones were extremely expensive and charges for calls were expensive too. Jeff responded to this challenge by taking a cardboard mobile model given to him by a local car dealer; placing it between the bucket seats of his car; adding an old head set to it; and, installing a fake aerial on the roof of his car.

When we would stop at a stoplight, Jeff would pretend he was making a call, much to the amazement of other drivers who could not afford this new method of communication. Once, when asked by a fellow Rotarian how he liked his mobile phone, Jeff said, "The model I have still needs lot of work!"

Jeff started one custom that we still observe to this day. He suggested that Kathy and Tom Myers, and Ruth and I, Join him and Sandy for Christmas shopping and dinner in Chagrin Falls several weeks before Christmas. Although Jeff said this was done to help shopping-challenged Tom find a gift for Kathy, Jeff usually made the most purchases.

The Myers, Sandy, Ruth and I still honor this special night each December. Jeff also called together some of his male friends for a Christmas luncheon each year...a custom Ben Bassham and I have been trying to continue each holiday season. Jeff taught us how to live...cherishing each day a living it was like your last.

Jeff Taught Us How to Die

One day in 1994, several years before I retired, Jeff came to our house while I was up on a ladder, repairing a board on the front of our garage. He said, "I have something to tell you." I started down the ladder and he said, "No, stay up there." He talked a minute or two and then said, "I got some bad news yesterday." I came down the ladder and looked at him. He had tears in his eyes and I said, "What is it Jeff?" He perked up, and said, "Stop acting like a damn psychologist and just go back up that ladder. I can't tell you when you're down here." I crawled back up the ladder, wondering what this was all about. He said, "You know when we went to the hospital to check on a lump Sandy had in her breast?" My mind raced, thinking he was about to tell me Sandy had breast cancer.

I couldn't help thinking of the part of our life when Ruth had breast cancer and all the worry that had caused over the years. Jeff said, "Well, she is fine, but I told them about a lump in my breast and they did a biopsy on it." There was a long pause and then he said, "It's cancer." I got off the ladder and we just stood there hugging one another. Then he said,

“Sandy and I are going out for lunch” and left me standing there with tears in my eyes.

The next few years were filled with treatments and heartaches as the treatments only slowed the progress of the cancer, but there were light moments too.

A few months after the diagnosis, Jeff received a spa package for two at the spa in Aurora. Sandy couldn't go and Jeff invited me. We spent the day receiving special treatments but my favorite moment was the luncheon we were given. We were served in a lounge along with about thirty other guests, all women. We were seated in the center of the room with all of the women surrounding us. They kept looking at us and Jeff suspected they were talking about us...so....He stood up and said, “We are not gay...not that there is anything wrong with that (invoking his best Jerry Seinfeld voice).” The place erupted in laughter at his comments.

As his illness became more debilitating and he needed to spend more time at home, he became an Indians' fan and watched almost every game (and all of the O.J. trial). Dick Sears had season tickets and upon learning Jeff loved the Tribe, invited Jeff and me to a game. This was one of the most frightening nights of my life. Dick, who suffers from a degenerative neck problem and has difficulty turning his head, picked us up in his new Lexus.

Jeff, who was currently undergoing radiation treatments to the cancer in his neck and had trouble turning his head,

jumped into the front seat. Dick said, "Jeff, since neither of us can turn our heads, you look out the right window and I'll take the driver's side. You tell me when it is clear to go and I'll go!" I thought they were pulling my leg, but they weren't! We would come to a stop sign or stoplight, and Jeff would shout, "Go!" and without any hesitation, Dick would hit the accelerator.

I held a pillow in front of my seat belted-body and hoped for the best. I actually prayed for our safety, but the same thing happened at every crossing...rural Portage County or Cleveland, Ohio! After the game, I suggested I would be willing to drive home, but these guys were having too much fun (Especially after Dick used his cell phone [he had a real one] to summon the beer guy to our seats too many times!)

That summer, I had a stress test as a part of my annual physical, and as Ruth and I were having our nightly glass of wine with Sandy and Jeff, the hospital called to say I had some blockage and that they would send an ambulance to pick me up. I said I would have Ruth drive me to the hospital. When I got off the phone, I told the Grahams about the call. Sandy was empathic, but Jeff shouted, "Yes!" and said, "Now, you and I can watch O.J. and the Indians!" I never left him forget this comment about my plight, but it never bothered him one bit!

There was another unforgettable moment during the later months of Jeff's illness that we will never forget. Our third grandson, Connor, was spending lots of time with us that summer as his Mom worked, and he and Jeff became very

close. Connor would go over to Jeff's house and Jeff would give him cokes and snacks and they would talk. Connor was four years old at the time and had lots of fun with Jeff. One day, Jeff called and wanted me to come over. When I got there, he seemed very sad and had tears in his eyes. I said, "What's the matter?" Jeff told me what had happened.

As Connor was leaving the house, after a thirty-minute visit, he looked up at Jeff and said, "Jeff, I love you." Jeff was so overcome by Connor's small-boy sincerity that he said, "I just couldn't get any words out...so I closed the door and just cried." He was afraid that he may have hurt Connor's feelings by not saying anything back to him, but we assured him that Connor was just telling him the way he really felt and not to worry. Jeff and Connor told each other they loved each other lots of times after that!

The Last Week

On Saturday night, of what turned out to be Jeff's last week, we all went to the Twin Lakes Country Club Member-Guest Putting Contest. After the event, the contestants were having dinner at the club, but eight of us were having dinner at Mario's in Aurora. Jeff seemed very tired, but although Ruth and others insisted that he could leave early, he insisted more strongly that he was staying until all had finished their dinners. That was our/his last social engagement.

On Monday he went into University Hospital for a checkup and several blood transfusions. He never wanted to take oxygen, as his mother and grandmother had taken oxygen in

the last stages of their battle with cancer, and Jeff saw this as the final capitulation. On Wednesday, he came home from the hospital, on his forty-sixth birthday, and carried his oxygen bottle into his room. Sandy called Ruth to come over to check on him, as he was not doing well. Ruth called me and said Jeff was asking for Pete Williams, Tom Myers and me and that I should come right away. Ruth's many years of work as a hospice nurse signal to me that she knew Jeff was about to finish his long battle.

We gathered around his bed. He was restless and from time to time..."saw" friends and family who were not there (Is this what happens when folks have near death experiences and live to tell about them?). Sandy got into bed with Jeff and held him as Ruth and Pete and Tom and I sat on the edge of his bed. As if in a movie, Jeff sat up in bed, looked at Sandy and said, "Sandy, I love you...Goodbye." He lay back down, sighed a long sigh and stopped breathing. Ruth turned off the noisy oxygen...we all cried...and we all left the room to let Sandy say goodbye to Jeff in private.

Jeff Graham knew how to live and he showed us all how to die...with courage and grace. Jeff is the only person I have ever been with at the moment of death...my admiration of him and his life grew even more in those moments. We all want to live good lives and die with courage and dignity. Jeff taught us how to live and how to die. Jeff did both as well as they can be done! Connor wasn't the only one who loved Jeff...we all did!

Postscript

In the eleven years since Jeff's death, Sandy continues to be a wonderful neighbor and friend. We still share a drink many evenings, and will probably do it more often, as she retired from her teaching position, after thirty-five years, last Friday. All of Sandy's friends love her as we loved Jeff.

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