

Tribute to Kenneth R. Byers

(1924 - 2014)

Ruth and I knew Ken for the thirty years we have lived in Twin Lakes. He lived on Dollar Lake, just five houses from our East Twin Lakes home. Over the years, we got to know him as he walked his dog past our home, stopping to chat with us each time he passed by. We soon got to know that he was a pretty adventurous fellow...piloting airplanes well into his eighties...and camping and hiking and biking long after most senior citizens engaged in these activities.

We also discovered early on that he was a bit eccentric ...working on a full sized airplane (minus the wings) in his living room. Neither of us were ever in his home until the last few weeks of his life-ending illness, but you could see the cockpit/fuselage of the plane in his front window each time we walked our dog past his house. We never talked about the plane (or the one in the garage, or the one in the basement), but shared flying stories. His were much more exciting as he flew B-24's in WWII.

After he lost his wife, Bruce, thirteen years ago in a tragic horse riding accident, Ken became more of a fixture in the neighborhood as he was now alone, walked more, road his bike more and was available to talk to neighbors more often. His best buddy in the neighborhood was Norm, who lived directly across the street from our house...and where Ken and Norm spent many warm weather hours exchanging war

stories and other tales about the important issues of the day...which brings me to my first story about Ken.

The Front Porch Story: I will probably remember Ken best by what happened nearly every morning when the weather permitted. Ken would ride his bike (or walk) to Norm's house, retrieve the morning papers from Norm's mailbox, sit at Norm's patio table and commence reading the paper. About every twenty minutes, Ken would shout, "Norm, it's time to get up?" and continue reading. This would go on for an hour or so...and very loudly as both Norm and Ken were hard of hearing (Ken told me this summer that he lost his hearing aids three or four years ago and had not bothered to replace them...and Norm never had hearing aids!).

The funny thing about this was that in the three or four years that this scenario took place, Norm NEVER came outside, as he never got up before noon each day. Ken read Norm's newspaper and Norm slept. I suspect the Ken was merely legitimizing his reading of Norm's morning papers by shouting at him to get up. Ken would fold up the paper when he was finished, put a rock on it so it would not blow away and continue on his daily ride/walk. This scenario occurred more than one hundred times that I was aware of...and I am sure of that many more of which I was unaware. The reason I was so aware of this happening is that Ken shouted to Norm at the top of his voice...every morning!!!

The Glider Story. This story was told to me second hand by a close friend of Ken's, Jim Myers, but family members assured me that they had heard it before. It seems that Ken

agreed to go on a glider flight with a friend. As the flight neared its end, and with a glider having no power source of its own, the pair started looking for a place to land. They spotted a farm field and made a safe landing. As Ken approached the farm house to ask if they could use the phone to alert their chase team where to pick them and the glider up, they realized that they had landed in the middle of a nudist picnic in a remote section of Portage County. Ken said that made their call very quickly, but that he id have time to steal a glance or two!!

The Lawn Mower Story. At Ken's funeral, his next-door neighbor, Pat Boyden, told a delightful story about Ken. When Ken mowed his yard, his lawn mower motor would conk out about every two or three rounds. Instead of becoming angry or frustrated, Ken would play fetch with is dog for several minutes before restarting the balky mower. Pat said that it didn't bother him that Ken's mower engine didn't work in a reliable fashion, but that he knew Ken was working on his airplane engine and had mentioned to Pat that he would take him a ride once the engine and plane were ready to fly. Pat said that with his knowledge of Ken's mower engine repair history he didn't know what he was going to say if the plane was ever finished and Ken offered him a ride.

The Mercedes Story. Ken had silver Cadillac and seemed very happy with it. We were surprised when this past summer, Ken bought a red Mercedes convertible. He didn't drive it very often because he said that if he drove it he would have to wash it and "that was too much work." I said,

“You’ll never wear it out.” But he wanted to keep it clean and I only saw him drive it two times in the Three Months he owned it before he died. Yes, Ken bought his dream car two months before he got sick and died three weeks later. Pushing ninety years old and buying a Mercedes convertible...now I call that adventurous! He lived life his way!

There are many more Ken Stories but the above stories will give you the flavor of our wonderful neighbor, Ken. He and Bruce raised five wonderful children and they were beside him when he died...in his living room, beside his plane, overlooking Dollar Lake. I think Ken did it the way we all wish we could die...with our family, surrounded in love, surviving long enough to say goodbye and soon enough to not burden others. I salute Ken...the veteran, the husband, the father and the friend to many.

Note: Ken Byers was born August 15, 1924 and died October 3, 2013. He was survived by: daughter, Heather (Mark) Cline and sons, Rob (Robin), Bruce (Andrea), Whitney, and Christopher (Dianna); brothers, Donald (Ramona) and William (Eloise); and long term companion, Patricia Glidden. His parents, his wife, Bruce, sister Virginia Criss, brothers Roland and Robert and grandson, Jordan Cline, preceded him in death.

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