

# Norm Stories

Our neighbor, Norman Russell, died January 28, 2013. Norm was one of the most unique people I have ever known...and Ruth, Jill and I will miss him...as he added a very different dimension to our lives, and to the lives of many of our neighbors.

Norm was ninety-four years old and maintained his mental faculties to the very end. He was a proud Army veteran of WWII. Most of his career, he was a draftsman at Highway Products and Twin Coach in Kent, Ohio. Fred Gressard, who was one of Norm's colleagues years ago, said that Norm was the most gifted draftsman he ever knew and was sure that Norm could have had a career as a cartoonist, if he had been so inclined. This story is not about Norm's career, but about the many interactions Ruth and I had with him over the nearly thirty years that we knew him. Norm was definitely a character!

## Story 1...The Proposed Adoption

Shortly after we moved to our new home in 1986, with Jill and six month old Andrew, Norm and Dominica, knocked on our door. We invited them into our home, but they insisted on staying on the porch. Dominica, Norm's loving and caring wife, explained that they had observed our busy life style...how Jill was a single mother attending college and how Ruth and I both worked and how they were retired and had lots of time on their hands and how they loved children and how they only had one adult son.....and that they

would like to adopt Andrew, as they could give him their full time attention! Ruth and I were stunned, but kept our composure, thanking them for their thoughtfulness, but indicating that we were planning to help Jill raise Andrew and that we enjoyed having them live with us. They or we never broached this topic again. Ruth and I did not interpret this as two nutty folks proposing a crazy plan, but as two loving people wanting to be helpful.

Ruth and I have talked of this day many times...wondering how a couple in their seventies had concluded that they were prepared to assume such a task. Ruth and I think it was because they were such loving folks.

## **Story 2... The ATV Bed**

Soon after we moved into our new home, I purchased an All Terrain Vehicle (ATV) to pull my six-foot wide mower and the trailer I used to haul dirt/fertilizer/plants. I would take a load of plants into the front yard, park my ATV and trailer and start to work. On many occasions, I would look up and Norm would be lying on my ATV, pretending to be asleep. I would say, "Well, Hi Norm. How's it going?" Norm would only emit a loud snoring noise. I would say, "It's a perfect day to be doing yard work." More loud snores. "I'm gonna finish planting this ivy." More snoring. After 20-30 more minutes of planting and snoring, I would say, "Ruth has lunch ready for me, I'm going in now. See you later." More snoring. I would leave, go into the house to have lunch and notice that sometime during lunch, Norm would have "awakened" and departed. This unusual occurrence happened at least a

dozen times during my first few years of my front yard work. We never talked about it!

### **Story 3...Early Morning Hikes**

Norm was not one to get up early, so this is indeed a surprising story. A number of us in the neighborhood started an early morning walking group. We would meet at a central location at 6:00 AM and take off on what was usually a 2.5-3.0 mile walk. Kathy Myers and I were the most faithful walkers and during a ten year period walked over 10,000 miles with other friends and their dogs. One cold morning, about six of us were walking in pitch black darkness... blabbing away as was the custom! Two of the women gave out blood-curdling screams.

There was confusion as to what was happening. One woman said, "Norm, is that you?" Yes, it was Norm who was standing in the middle of the street, delighted that he had scared all of us, some nearly to death. Some of the walkers were a bit angry to be frightened that way, but most just said, "That's Norm." I will add that we encountered him on several other occasions, standing in the middle of the street, but after that first encounter, most of the women carried flashlights, so as not to be scared again. Norm, like Ellen, loved to scare folks.

### **Story 4...The Morning News**

As I have mentioned earlier, Norm didn't get up early. As the years rolled on, he got up later and later, sometimes after

noon if he had stayed up late watching old movies, as was his custom. Norm's buddy, Mr. Byers, another neighbor, who lived a quarter mile away, visited Norm almost every morning when the weather permitted. Mr. Byers would ride his bicycle to Norm's about 9:30 or 10:00 each morning, picking up Norm's newspaper from the mailbox and sitting on the front porch.

Mr. Byers, who was/is hard of hearing and hasn't replaced his hearing aid since he lost it a few years ago, would shout "Time to get up Norm" every few minutes while reading the newspaper. Mr. Byers would read and shout, read and shout, until he finished the paper, and then get back on his bike and depart...almost never seeing Norm. They would get together on the porch later in the day, but almost never in the morning. Mr. Byers read, Norm slept.

## **Story 5...Chicken Farmer**

Norm was fascinated that Ruth had grown up on a farm, and that among other animals and crops, had raised chickens. On their farm, they raised all kind of animals and the crops one would expect on a general farm. However, Norm was fixated on the fact that Ruth had raised chickens and knew lots about them. He would frequently greet her by saying, "Hi, Chicken Farmer," and then proceed to ask her some question about the care and raising of chickens. What is candling? Why do you feed grit to chickens? How do you gather eggs when the hen doesn't want you to take them? Are roosters really that mean? This went on for twenty years...I think Norm just loved to talk to Ruth...who doesn't?

## **Story 6...Delivering Vegetables and Desserts After Dominica died**

Ruth started fixing desserts and certain special foods for Norm and Mike. I had a garden and would take Norm vegetables I had grown. On one occasion, I took a Wal-Mart plastic bag full of fresh vegetables to Norm. He opened the door and stuck his head out through the empty windowpane on a storm door...in fact, he stuck his head out through the empty pane and into the bag...holding the bag by each of its handles.

With his head completely inside the bag, he started murmuring, "Yum, yum, yum." No other conversation was possible so I said, "I hope you enjoy the vegetables Norm," and departed. On the way back to our house I kept turning to see what Norm would do, but he only repeated "Yum, yum" over and over. I had a mild concern that he might suffocate from having his entire head in the plastic bag, or strangle on the frame of the missing windowpane...but he didn't! A trip to Norm's was always an experience!

## **Story 7...Norm Returning Dishes**

Norm always returned the empty food dishes to Ruth in a very unique way. The first time Norm returned a dish that Ruth had sent to his house, Ruth went to the door, only to find the empty dish, but no Norm. She retrieved the dish and returned to the kitchen. The doorbell rang again; no one was there. The doorbell rang again...no person. Out of the corner

or her eye, Ruth saw Norm hiding under our Ravine Room!! She called his name but he did not emerge. This only happened once, as Ruth is a fast learner...but Norm was never present at the door when he returned an empty dish. Ruth would pick up the dish and not answer the door for the next 4-5 rings!!! I said Norm was a unique person!

## **Story 8...Hood Ornament**

As Ruth would stop to pick up the mail when she was returning by car from some errands she was running, Norm would signal like that he wanted to talk to her, walk to the car and lie down, spread eagle, over the hood of her car. At first, when would try to talk to Norm, "How's it going Norm?" to no avail. Next she tried waiting him out, but didn't want to sit in the street for the minutes/hours it might take for him to move. As a last resort, she started to slowly inch ahead until he would safely slide off of the hood. Finally, she learned to pick up her mail, while traveling about ten miles an hour (I exaggerate) so as to not get an unwanted passenger. She had the same problem leaving home, but quickly solved that problem by zipping down the driveway at a relatively speedy pace. If Norm wanted companionship, why wouldn't he talk? If he wanted attention, he certainly got it...at the risk of life and limb!

## **Story 9...Norm's Stories**

There are so many more stories about Norm, but I think you are getting the idea what he was like. One thing I have omitted, however, is that Norm had many stories of his own

which were fascinating. He had stories about his childhood, his athletic interests, his wartime experiences, his friends, and interestingly, about his lack of motivation to work or achieve. I will say that I never saw him work in the yard, but he did fool with several old cars he had. He said he had a vintage Packard car that he had constructed his garage around and had planned to restore...but he never showed it to me. When I asked to see it, he would always say that he would show it to me once he had restored it! When I asked how he would remove it from the garage once it was finished, he would say, "Tear the garage down!" I imagine he would too!

Norm was a unique, one might say eccentric, man who lived life like Frank suggested, "He did it his way!" Probably too many doorbell rings and too many pranks for an eighty or ninety year old man, but when I think of Norm I think of the old psychological adage, "You are only young once, but you can be immature your whole life!" Norm remained young, and immature in that old body and enjoyed life more than most folks. Ruth and I are grateful he was a part of our lives and remind ourselves to be silly once in a while.

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