PASSIONS
by Luke Teague

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Mornings warrant celebration. The dawn of each new day brings restored vision, renewed energy and a literal breath of fresh air – the last of which is so often taken for granted. Each sunrise is truly a gift, providing another opportunity for life. And while life is a precious privilege and not a promise, death is certain. Still, we are somehow naive to this sentiment. Remarkably, dying remains taboo, morbid and a subject not welcomedly discussed. However, death creates a level playing field, an equal opportunity with no regard for wealth, age, gender, intelligence or attractiveness. Until the unforeseen occurs, we all remain somehow invincible until we realize that we are not. The only way to battle the inevitable end of our worldly existence is to accept that death is truly the beginning of our eternal life – so rejoice and be glad.

“First, Andrew had to undergo a bone-marrow biopsy to pinpoint the specific type of cancer. They performed an impromptu surgery to install a dual-line Broviak into his artery, which would facilitate the administration of chemotherapy agents that were essential to saving his life. As they walked us to the room where my little boy would have the procedure, I fought hard to maintain my composure as feelings of severe nausea gripped my stomach. Flashbacks of Andrew’s birth flooded my conscience as each room we passed bore witness to scenes of dying children,” she remembered.

Having not even experienced kindergarten, the news that Andrew suffered from acute lymphoblastic leukemia was startling, and the odds of survival were even more discouraging.

“There was no place to escape the heartbreak that was playing out in front of my eyes. I witnessed children on ventilators and infants tethered to tubes, all while their parents pleaded for mercy. I felt guilty as I briefly made eye contact with the individuals occupying each and every room. I remembering thinking how invasive it must have seemed to them to see me stare, but I remained in a fog.” Michele remarked.

An experience that was equally as isolating as it was unnerving, both parents struggled helplessly to comfort their sick child, who was just too young to understand the magnitude of the situation.

“I couldn’t get over how little he looked in that hospital bed. He was covered in petechiae, or little red dots, from head to toe. His arms and legs were full of bruises, and his stomach was severely swollen. This was just the beginning. After kneeling for prayer at his bedside, I carefully climbed beside him. As I stroked his head, he immediately relaxed in my arms,” she said.

As Andrew finally fell asleep, nurses began to prepare for the night. Finally, some semblance of solace for mother and son after an intensely emotional day.

“Our assigned nurse checked one last time to see if she could do anything to make us more comfortable. I held Andrew tight, drew in a deep breath and whispered, ‘just make it all go away.’ As she turned off the light and started to pull the door closed, the nurse paused briefly and replied, ‘I wish I could.’”

After several years, Andrew entered remission, but the stress associated with a child battling cancer had taken its toll on the family.

“Gary and I handled the experience in very different ways
and ultimately decided to end our marriage. Because of Andrew’s ordeal, however, I became interested in studying death and dying and critical illness in children professionally. After being around so many grieving families, I made the decision to pursue a degree in sociology,” Michele explained, crediting the field, in addition to psychology and grief counseling, as her life’s work.

Certified as a grief counselor, Michele graduated with a bachelor’s degree in sociology from John Carroll University. She also holds a master’s in psychology.

In 1999, Michele placed third in a student paper competition sponsored by The North Central Sociological Association for a controversial essay she authored about “Same-Sex Domestic violence: Social and Political Issues.”

For four years beginning in 1993, she represented the North East Ohio Chapter of the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society of America as their team-in-training honorary patient ambassador responsible for delivering motivational speeches at events hosted around the country.

In addition, Michele has lectured at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, where she taught medical professionals about parenting children with critical illnesses and death from a parent’s perspective. She previously served on the board of Cleveland’s University Hospitals’ Rainbow Babies & Children’s family faculty for several years, where she advised and advocated for families with critically ill children.

For Michele, entering funeral service was a natural progression. After expressing interest in working visitations, she was hired by Busch Family Funeral Homes, which operates several locations around Cleveland. Eventually, she became a licensed funeral director in Ohio.

“My journey was forever altered because of Andrew’s cancer diagnosis. Because of him, I entered the funeral ministry. It’s a choice I have never once regretted,” she said.

With her four children having reached adulthood, Michele continued working for James and Mark Busch until experiencing another health-related complication. Shockingly, she was diagnosed with a rare form of blood cancer.

“It was a difficult time. I was upset, scared and lonely.”

Reluctantly, Michele took a step outside of her comfort zone by creating an online dating profile: “I met David on match.com. We had our first date on Aug. 22, 2005, and we were married exactly five years later to the day. I always tell him that I fell in love the first time I looked into those beautiful blue eyes.”

Above: Andrew - 6 years old
Left: Andrew with Jim Humble, marathon runner in Chicago, running in Andrews honor and in his step-son Jay Holloway’s memory.
Opposite Page Top: David and Michele attend Anthony’s wedding
Opposite Page Bottom: David and Michele with family following their wedding on Hilton Head, South Carolina.
David Rupar was an engineer by trade, a brilliant man, exceptionally skilled in math and science. A devoted list maker, he was analytical, sensible and could appreciate any decision made by the facts. He was also divorced and almost the complete opposite of his sentimental and affectionate mate.

“When I ask him about when he knew he first loved me, I’d get a shoulder shrug. He once told me that if I really wanted him to be romantic, he could recite mathematical equations to me,” she commented.

David was loving, kind and selfless – all the qualities Michele was seeking in a soul mate.

“When we first started dating, I was still receiving chemotherapy. On one occasion and much to my surprise, he met me in the lobby of the doctor’s office so I would have someone to drive me home. He knew I would be exhausted,” she reminisced.

Thankful for the support of her new beau, Michele, too, soon entered remission.

Never desiring to have children, David was instead devoted to work. Disciplined, frugal and displaying an innate business acumen, he was able to retire just before turning 50.

“In his early years, he believed that he was a ‘self-made-man.’ If you would have asked David what his secret was for success, he would have told you that he kept his head down, worked hard, saved money and kept his wants to a minimum. He would have told you that he was successful because he chose to be successful. In the beginning, he never would have attributed his gifts to anyone other than himself. That all changed in late 2006 when he began to attend church with me,” she said.

After marrying Michele, David was immediately immersed in a new and very unfamiliar role as a stepfather, eventually becoming a grandfather.

“My kids love David and the grandchildren simply adore him. He couldn’t have imagined life any other way,” Michele commented.

“As the kids were busy starting their own families, we decided to relocate from the harsh winters of Ohio, desiring a place to continue our love story. Having the freedom to choose virtually anywhere, we settled first in Savannah, Georgia, and then built our dream home in nearby Statesboro,” described Michele, who began work at Ogeechee Technical College initially as an instructor of funeral service before being promoted to program director.

“Not long after we made the move south, he came to realize that his blessings didn’t come from what he could do for himself. They came from something or someone much bigger than he was. One of the first questions I ever asked David before we started dating was if he believed in God. I asked him if he was spiritual and if he had a belief in something other than himself. He admitted that he was aware of something bigger but couldn’t define it,” Michele remembered, crediting David’s skepticism to his engineering background and strict reliance on tangible facts and evidence.

“I have always tried to put God first. I wasn’t always successful at it, but I always gave it my best shot. I knew I couldn’t have raised four successful children without His help and have constantly relied on prayer before making any decisions,” she said.

All in all, life was good. As Michele worked steadily to grow and improve the funeral service program at Ogeechee Tech, David enjoyed the benefits of retirement but soon missed the workplace camaraderie and routine found in a regular job. Briefly, he dabbled with teaching various technical college courses and was employed with GAF Roofing and Materials Corporation. Michele and David became members of Statesboro First United Methodist Church and were heavily involved in various church activities.

During the latter part of the summer of 2016, David began experiencing some stomach discomfort. Dismissing the minor aches as an annoyance attributed to irregular eating habits and the stress of a new job, he was unconcerned.

By January, the abdominal pain was severe enough for a visit to his primary care physician, which was followed by an appointment with a gastroenterologist. On Jan. 13, 2017, doctors found spots of cancer on David’s pancreas, liver and right lung. He was promptly referred to an oncologist, who delivered the sobering news. Although chemotherapy was still an option, his life span had been diminished to an expectancy of between three months and two years.

“David’s diagnosis knocked the wind out of both of us. Never in our wildest dreams did we ever think this was going to be part of our love story. One of the reasons I believe we’ve been blessed so much in our relationship is because we committed our marriage to the Lord. We have come to rely on the fact that each of us is accountable to someone other than ourselves in our marriage,” Michele explained.

Following his diagnosis, David began chemotherapy and vowed to continue treatment as long as the outcome remained positive and he was able to live a somewhat normal existence.
Photo following David’s diagnosis. Michele’s sister, Jayne, took photos every couple weeks to document their journey through his illness.
Above: Trey Brown in Chemistry class at Ogeechee Tech, working on naming hydrocarbons.
Below: David and Mitchell with grandson, Palmer, during coming home party for Andrew returning from Afghanistan.
“Basically, he didn’t want to feel even more sick while trying to fight the cancer and wanted some enjoyment during his final months, including the ability to check things off his list,” she said.

Giving him the biggest sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, David continued to keep his list. After all, he thrived most when organized and kept occupied completing various tasks detailed by level of importance or necessity.

“One of the first things David did when he was diagnosed was to make a list of things he needed to take care of to make life easier for me when he was gone. He is the sweetest man, so strong and courageous, with a fierce love for me, my children and grandchildren. He loves deeper and stronger than anyone I have ever known.”

Dealing with a terminal illness is challenging enough to handle in private, but offering to share the experience in a public setting requires a unique selflessness very few possess.

“Since I was teaching at Ogeechee Tech about serving grieving families, making arrangements and directing funerals, David felt his situation would be relevant to the students. He spoke to my class various times through his illness and hope he could give them some experience. That was David. He was constantly thinking of others,” she remarked.

As his cancer worsened and further treatment was deemed ineffective, David prepared for the end of his life.

“He completed the last few tasks on his list, called hospice and came to terms with the inevitable. In the last weeks of
David had this epiphany several weeks before he died that when it came to our “bucket list” that we had it all wrong. He believed that our bucket lists shouldn’t be full of things we wanted to do for ourselves. He felt that they should always be full of the things we want to do for others. So, the artist drew David with his bucket at the feet of Jesus washing his feet.

“Artist Ashley Wrenn visited us a couple weeks prior to David’s death to paint a rendition of the bucket list painting. David wanted to see what his funeral was going to be like, so we created it in our living room. It was powerful.” Michele Rupar
his life, David visited with friends, was serenaded by music from church members and surrounded by his family who loved him,” lamented Michele.

On Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, David Lee Rupar passed away at the home he and Michele shared.

“David was so kind, compassionate and generous to his core. I don’t think he ever believed how much people loved, admired and respected him. He was my soul mate and my best friend. Because of him, I experienced the greatest love story of my life,” Michele said.

The following week, Michele met with Greg Frost, general manager of Hodges-Moore Funeral Home in Statesboro, on campus during her regularly scheduled grief counseling class. Students were able to witness firsthand the raw emotion of a recent and devastating loss and to observe an actual arrangement conference. Moreover, the class was well-acquainted with David, which made it much more personal for all involved. The funeral was held on campus, giving students the option to participate by passing out programs and handling seat assignments. It was a celebration filled with music, art and poetry, along with words of comfort, hope and grace.

“I will always believe there were three people in our marriage. David and I always felt the power and presence of our Heavenly Father. He is the reason our love story will remain forever and ever. Because of Him, I was able to endure it all,” Michele concluded.

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