

Reflections

A Life Well-Lived

By Andy Anderson



Two-thousand, three-hundred and fifty-five.

I took the time to count recently, and that's how many cards my wife and I exchanged during our 23-year marriage.

We never needed an occasion. When waiters would see us sharing cards at a restaurant, they'd ask if we were celebrating a birthday or anniversary. But the answer was usually no. We just enjoyed reminding each other

how blessed we felt to have the other in our lives. Likewise, the flowers I gave my wife every Friday didn't symbolize an event—simply gratitude for another week with my soul mate.

Vera and I met in 1982 at Fort Sill, Okla., where she was a colonel in the Army and I was a captain. We both felt a spark, but several obstacles threatened to doom our romance. Vera, who had served as an Army nurse for 24 years and moved 18 times all over the world, joked that she was “married” to the Army. I had two children from a previous marriage. Vera was 18 years my senior. Hardly a recipe for a perfect relationship. Yet as our courtship evolved, we sensed we could weather any storm.

And I'm sure we could have, but after our wedding in 1984, we seldom encountered anything other than blue skies. My children grew to adore Vera. (Who wouldn't?) Her retirement from the Army ensured lots of quality time for our family. Any concern about our age difference evaporated as we realized we couldn't possibly be better-suited. As Vera quipped, “Age is mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter.” Our love just grew, and the cards just kept coming.

But there are no more cards now. Vera died July 31, 2007 of ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease.

It was such a cruel way for her to die. Vera lived every minute of life to the fullest, reveling in gardening, gourmet cooking, scuba-diving or one of her many other passions.



When she noticed in 2006 that her leg felt “funny,” she knew as a nurse that something was wrong. Several inconclusive doctors' appointments eventually led her to the office of Dr. Michael Rivner, an MCG neurologist, who at last delivered the diagnosis. ALS, or nerve cell degeneration, causes gradual paralysis and is incurable.

Vera wasn't bitter or angry. She'd had an idyllic life, not a single regret, and was grateful for the good health she'd enjoyed up to that point. We had our share of tears, but her last months were mostly spent in reflection and appreciation for a life well-lived.

As her disease quickly progressed, I like to think I demonstrated all the love and tenderness in her illness with which we showered each other in good health. I fed her, bathed her, turned her over in bed, lifted her dozens of times a day, dressed her when a friend visited ... anything she needed.

We were awaiting one such visitor in late July—our minister, the Rev. Greg Porterfield of Wesley United Methodist Church—and she'd asked me to prop her up in bed, fix her hair and otherwise make her as welcoming a hostess as she could manage. I did as she asked, then went to make myself a cup of coffee. When I returned just moments later, she'd lapsed into unconsciousness. Vera died shortly thereafter.

Words can't express my grief, but I was comforted by the many family members and friends whose love for Vera helped keep her spirit alive. One of those friends, Kathleen Socrates, wanted to establish a scholarship in Vera's name. She called Eisenhower Army Medical Center, where Vera had treated many patients during her tenure as chief director of nursing.

The medical center suggested that Kathleen





contact MCG. Vera, who earned her nursing degree from the University of Pennsylvania, wasn't an alumna, but she loved the Augusta community and had devoted part of her career to recruiting nurses into the Army.

What could be a better legacy than a scholarship for MCG nursing students considering an Army career?

We received donations from more than 100 adoring friends, admiring colleagues and loving family members. With more than \$33,000 in contributions and still growing, the scholarship fund grew into an endowment.

Even perfect strangers donated, including golfer Tom Watson, who offered a beautiful letter and a donation in memory of his caddy, who also died of ALS. The first scholarship was awarded during MCG's commencement in May to Artinsia Shakir.

I miss Vera every day but am so pleased that her name and her legacy live on through this endowment. Nothing could have pleased her more.

To contribute to the Col. Vera Nofe Anderson Memorial Scholarship Endowment, contact Eileen Brandon, director of development for the MCG School of Nursing, at 706-721-1457, ebrandon@mcg.edu or Medical College of Georgia School of Nursing, EC-4432, Augusta GA 30912.

MCG Today welcomes submissions to the Reflections column. Typed essays (approximately 750 words) reflecting a professional or personal experience should be submitted to:

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