

EULOGY

Mary Gorski, reflecting on her husband, Dave, at his memorial service

July 29, 2021

“Task mode.” That has been my response over and over when people have asked how I am doing. During Dave’s month of home hospice, there were so many tasks. We had generous assistance from many — too many to list by name — but still, to be a spouse of a person in home hospice often feels like being the manager of a healthcare facility that is located within one’s own home. Emotions get set aside to do tasks.

And then the person dies, and there are tasks again. Death is a task-intensive activity. And so, I’ve continued in task mode before letting the magnitude of what has happened settle in my bones; before I start to really believe that Dave won’t be sitting in his easy chair when I wake up from a snooze on the couch. He won’t be making a batch of lasagna for visiting friends. He won’t be thinking of something very important to tell me just as I am walking out the door. Really Dave, you couldn’t think to tell me about the recently discovered astronomical phenomena an hour earlier when we were silently sitting across the table from each other? Husbands!

In the midst of tasks, emotions stay tucked in their little box buried somewhere deep in the body, perhaps under the spleen. But every once in a while, I am hit by one of those emotions in the strangest way. A couple of weeks ago I took out the garbage and realized that Dave would never do that again. I would never nag him to do it again. I told him this, and I think it was the first time that we both broke down and grieved together. There was something about losing a piece of the normalcy of our life that seemed so overwhelming, so cold, and so final.

The basics about Dave’s life are in the obituary. He was born in Milwaukee; he had a loving family that included his four brothers. He went to Messmer High School — actually, we both did, but 10 years apart. He worked at the old MECCA arena and played football, primarily semi-pro, but he did have an illustrious three-week career as a pro football player for the then Houston Oilers. He served in the US Army, based in Panama and Colorado Springs, and after, had an eclectic smattering of jobs, from coaching to carpet cleaning. Of course, his favorite job before retirement was his stint as the Central Bark Doggie Daycare bus driver. As I wrote in the obit, the dogs loved him, and he loved the dogs.

I have known Dave since I was 15. We met working at a YWCA day camp which my mother directed. For those of you doing the math, yes, we were 10 years apart in age, but no, I was not

a camper. Dave was a camp counselor and I worked on the waterfront. Be assured that I had plenty of lousy teenage dates before Dave and I ever considered going out.

Soon after summer camp ended, Dave entered the army. To be honest, I really don't remember how we started writing to each other. I love letters and have always had pen pals. Write me a letter and like a boomerang, you will get one from me in return. I'm guessing that's how things started. And at some point, I looked forward to those little blue army envelopes.

Home on leave, Dave took me to a movie: Phantasm. Not quite a first date movie, but it wasn't quite a date. Yet somewhere along the way those movie nights turned into date nights. The night after I graduated from high school, we headed out on our first trip together: the Smokey Mountains. Some of you may have seen the photo of the two of us – it's on display over there, me with the big glasses and fuzzy hair, Dave with hair that hadn't yet welcomed any gray.

That was 40 years ago. Three years after that trip we were married. We celebrated our 37th wedding anniversary the day he came home to hospice.

Rory, the gentleman playing the keyboard, was Dave's music therapist during hospice. When music therapy was suggested to Dave, he rolled his eyes and said to me, "What, am I going to be sitting here smacking some blocks together?" And then Rory came, and helped Dave find ways to use music to calm himself in the wee hours of the night, when the demons of a terminal illness seem to be at their strongest both in mind and body. When Dave took a turn for the worse Rory came back to be with him, sitting at Dave's bedside with a guitar. Since Dave hadn't been responsive for a while, we weren't sure how much of what Rory was saying really registered with Dave. That is until Rory sang a song about dancing. Eyes closed, Dave muttered one of the few full sentences that I had heard from him in 24 hours: "I don't dance." I laughed. That was Dave's one stipulation for our wedding reception. There would be no dancing. Dave does not dance.

I don't know what a spouse is really supposed to be, but I can tell you that more than anything, Dave was family to me with unconditional love. Like a favorite oak tree, he was always there ready to offer cover, to offer a sense of constancy and place. Strong storms periodically knocked off a branch or two, but he kept standing. I'd wander off on an adventure and he was always there waiting for me, that favorite oak, that sense of home. And when he was a part of some of those adventures, he continued to be my source of support.

None of us is perfect, and occasionally Dave had a knack for setting aside troublesome facts. As his wife, it could at times be maddening. Houses need to be fixed, licenses need to be renewed, taxes need to be filed.

But there was an upside. He didn't let facts get in the way of trying to carry out a good idea, a hope, a dream. As I noted, before we were married, Dave was in the army, stationed in Fort Carson, Colorado, near Colorado Springs. My first plane trip as an adult was going out to see him. He knew that I loved to ski. Living within a short drive of some of the country's best skiing, Dave wanted to give me a fabulous ski vacation. Never mind the FACT that he had never been on a pair of alpine skis in his life, a FACT that he neglected to mention as he told me about his plans.

Leading up to the visit he was busy with army tasks that took him away from the slopes. But he was determined to learn to ski before I got there, so he bought a book (this is pre-YouTube), took it with him on his assignment, and practiced his snowplow and other ski skills while standing in his army boots with his buddies offering pointers on form. His first time on a ski lift was when we got on one together. It was a bit of a bumpy start to our dream ski vacation, but we muddled through, got better, and had a wonderful time.

And that's how I often think of our years together. Occasionally there have been some bumpy rides, but we muddled through, got better, and had a wonderful time.

This is the first time that I will come home and the oak tree is no longer standing; this is the first storm that it hasn't been able to weather. As the tasks are completed, I am going to miss that oak more and more.