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Column - Jon Mark Beilue: Bone cancer survivor stands tall at her 50th class reunion

By Jon Mark Beilue



Gail Bennett doesn't really know why she refused to play the victim, why she never was content to sit in life's shadows, why she never wallowed in self-pity.

Jason Bennett, her dad, wouldn't let his 15-year-old daughter do that, for one. She also had a mountain of support from her church and classmates, many of whom would talk to her from her first-floor hospital window when visitors weren't allowed in her room. But mainly, she didn't know any other way to attack life.

"It just never entered my mind," said Gail. "This is what life dealt me, and I still have to do what I need to do. I was just under the impression I was going to have to work harder than anyone else."

Now Gail Meacham, she returned to Amarillo from Marietta, Ga., this weekend for a unique high school reunion. It was the 50th-year reunion for the Tascosa and Amarillo High 1959 graduating classes. The '59 Tascosa class, the first to graduate from the school, grew up with the Amarillo High seniors only to be split up when Tascosa opened in the fall of 1958.

Fifty years is a long time to put a stamp on lives, but it's doubtful if any classmate from either school overcame as much to accomplish as much as Meacham. In the summer before her freshman year in 1956, she felt some pain in her right thigh and later noticed a lump.

It was bone cancer. In a time before chemotherapy and radiation, a decision was made quickly to amputate her right leg at the hip. It was devastating. Gail had never even seen another human with one leg. Would she feel incomplete, less than a teenage girl?

There were no rehabilitation programs, no counseling programs. When she left the hospital, she was given some crutches with not even basic instructions on how to operate them. She fell and cut herself soon after, and was back in the hospital for stitches.

"The hardest part was I loved to dance. I had tap-danced since I was three," she said. "I was in talent shows at Sam Houston, and it was just such a part of me."

Gail knew what she couldn't do. She had to focus on what she could. She got a prosthetic leg from Denver, and while those steps at old Amarillo High were, in the beginning, intimidating when she returned for her sophomore year, she made them. Gail traded dancing for music, singing in the choir in high school and church. Never lacking for friends, she was named Junior Class favorite.

"She was so strong and so strong-willed and loved by everybody," said Jack Sisemore, who hosted a reception for the two classes Friday night. "She always had a beautiful smile. You would talk to her after many years and it's like you were talking five minutes ago. There's only one like her."

After the first graduation ceremonies at Tascosa, Gail was only getting started. She went to college at Texas Woman's University in Denton. She wanted to be a nurse, but a counselor advised against it because of her physical limitations. She suggested speech therapy. It was still helping others, Gail thought, so she would pursue that.

TWU had a program for deaf education, and Gail saw three deaf babies and how they were tenderly handled. She fell in love with the babies. A professor encouraged her to add deaf education as a double major, and thus began a career of teaching deaf children. In essence, a handicapped woman teaching handicapped children.

She taught deaf education in Dallas and in Lubbock. She got married, and when her husband was transferred to Atlanta in 1968, she got a call from the nearby Marietta school district wanting to know if she would start a deaf education program. She did, with three students.

Then she had 15 students in two months, and later became the hearing impaired administrator for the Cobb County School District. Then she took on the visually impaired program, and later the physically disabled program. In 1997, when she retired, Gail had more than 50 teachers under her watch.

One leg did not prevent her from raising two grown sons, now 41 and 35, who have given her five grandchildren. It did not prevent her from enjoying the outdoors, including snow skiing. She went to an amputee ski school in the mid-1980s, but a wreck on a mogul ended her use of a prostheses.

She moved around after that with crutches until arm surgery in the early 1990s forced her into a wheelchair. For the last two years, she's almost embarrassed to admit she's used a motorized wheelchair only because of hip surgery.

Life without one leg for the last 53 years has been what? There's a long pause.

"Very good. I'm very lucky. I could have died," she said. "I couldn't ask for two better sons. It's also frustrating, because there were physical barriers that I fight against even today. And the dancing you do in a wheelchair is not quite the same, but I will dance in heaven. I will dance and run in heaven."

In her 50th high school reunion this weekend, Gail Meacham was the only one who always sat among her classmates, yet no one stood so tall.