

ESSAY

by Bob VerBurg,

HERO AFFECTS MANY LIVES

How different life would be if not for the concern of one man

George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and other colonial revolutionaries did it: they had the courage to get involved. To each of them belongs the honor of being called heroes.

Abraham Lincoln did it too – had the courage to get involved, the courage to do the right thing and in doing so he lead our country out of the shackles of slavery. To him, too, belongs the honor of being called hero.

Norm Gillaume did it too - he had the courage to get involved, to do the right thing and in doing so he saved a life. To him, too belongs the honor of being called hero.

Norm who?...

Norm Gillaume.

Getting involved

One wet evening in May of 1991, a 17 year-old student rounded the corner of James Street and 120th Ave. in Holland too fast for road conditions and crashed into a telephone pole. In the moments following that crash, she began to die. Several bystanders, not sure of what to do, stood around waiting for help to come.

After a visit with his mother-in-law in Holland, Norm Guillaume was returning to his home in Kentwood.

“There’s been a bad accident”, a bystander told Norm as he stopped short of the intersection. “A car hit the pole over there and took down the lights and wires. You’ll have to find another way around.”

“Is anyone hurt?” asked Norm.

“It looks pretty bad; we’re just waiting for help to get here”, stated the bystander.

Not content to wait with the others, or simply turn around, Norm made the decision to do the right thing.

“The blood,” said Norm years later, “I couldn’t figure out where all the blood kept coming from. But I knew I needed to get that young girl’s airway opened and get her

breathing again. She was very, very near death. And no one else there was helping – at least not until I asked for help.”

Norm opened and kept open that airway until the paramedics arrived and took over. And perhaps in typical hero fashion, left the scene. Having done what needed to be done, having the courage to get involved when no one else would, Norm resumed his life.

Assuming the worst

“But I never knew what became of the young woman,” Norm said. “I just assumed she died. That’s how bad the accident was. It was so horrible and the memory of that night just always stayed in the back of my mind.”

That young woman was Kim Vredeveld and she didn’t die. But the next many years brought a fight and struggle for recovery that very few of us will ever have to endure.

The accident left her with a severe closed head injury. Kim awakened weeks later from a coma to find little use of the left side of her body. She suffered greatly impaired coordination to the rest of her body and realized she may never walk again. Kim awakened to the nightmare of a year in hospitals and years of grueling therapy.

In 1995 Kim had recovered enough to move into an apartment. She lived alone and lived lonely. She was dependant on nurses’ aides who cared for her several hours a day. Kim sat stranded in her wheelchair, trapped in a disabled and broken body.

“What man would want someone like this”? Kim wondered.

But willing to take a risk, Kim placed an ad in a West Michigan publication called *Single File* and the ad was bravely honest: “I am disabled,” it stated.

“That takes a lot of courage” I thought to myself. I decided to answer that ad and after

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long courtship, Kim and I were married last October 21, 2000. Those of you who read the Sunday Press the next day saw Tom Rademacher's article about our wedding and our story.

And so did Molly, Norm's wife.

"Remember that girl and that accident, Norm?" Molly asked.

"How many years ago was that? This sounds just like that girl" continued Molly. "Here, read this..." and nine years later, all the sensations and sights of that accident came flooding back to Norm.

I receive an unexpected phone call the day after our story ran in The Press.

"Ah yes... my name is Norm Guillaume. You don't know me. Are you the one in The Press yesterday?"

"I thought she had died"

After several minutes of conversation, it became clear that Norm had indeed been at that accident and literally saved a life – the woman I would someday marry!

Norm continued: "Do you think I could possibly meet Kim sometime? I can't believe that girl is now your wife; all these years I thought she had died and now here she is – in the Sunday Press – and married!"

Several weeks later Kim; her mother, Betty; a family friend Richard VanMaurick; and I met Norm and Molly.

Betty, her voice thick with emotion, confessed: "I don't know how to thank you for saving my daughter's life."

"I'm just glad I could help" said Norm with a reassuring embrace.

At the table, Betty held her only child's hand as Norm recounted that accident.

"I came upon the accident and all these people were standing around. I taught human anatomy and thought maybe I could help. Kim

had hit the pole so hard that her neck was kinked and her head lying on her shoulder very oddly. And she couldn't breathe because of the way her neck was.

"I reached into the car and checked for a broken neck; she didn't have one, fortunately. So I straightened and held her head up, but there was so much blood in her mouth she still couldn't breathe and I couldn't figure out where all the blood was coming from. I asked if someone could help me and a lady said she was nurse. We need to keep the blood off this girl's face so she can breathe I told her. The nurse retrieved some towels from her car and there we stood until the paramedics arrived – just holding up Kim's head and wiping the blood from her face."

"Do you know who that nurse was?" I asked.

"No, I don't." replied Norm. "I left after the paramedics arrived. And I came home and told Molly what happened.

"And all these years I wondered what happened to you", Norm softly stated as he looked at Kim. Looking past Kim's disability, he continued: "And you're just as beautiful now as I remember you from all those years ago."

As a Holland city police officer, Richard often sees an uncaring, calloused part of society and that prompted him to ask Norm, "Why did *you* decide to get involved when no one else would? A lot of the accidents I respond to, a crowd of people just stand around, not willing, or perhaps not daring to get involved."

"Something had to be done"

Norm hesitated and replied, "I'm not sure, but I knew if I didn't get her airway opened right away, Kim would die. Something had to be done."

Norm, too, was very curious about Kim's story. And as Kim and her mother told us

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stories about the pain and suffering as well as stories of victory and celebration of the last nine years, I noticed Molly watching her husband with pride and admiration. I was also struck with what a kind and gentle person Norm is.

As that night of discovery progressed, an unsettling feeling kept intruding: what if Norm hadn't gotten involved? What if Kim would have died? How different *my* life would have turned out: my courtship of Kim has been the best years of my life, our wedding a compelling and joyful event, our marriage a blessing from God and all that never would have happened if Norm had taken the easy way out and an alternate route from a stranger's problem. All that kept that feeling from evolving into a panicked fear was the reassurance of Kim's presence at the table and the wedding band on my finger.

Norm and Molly are still helping other people and in doing so are becoming heroes to

others as well. They continue to get involved in other peoples' lives in the work they do. The lesson: people who allow themselves to be used by God will do great things; by using Jesus Christ as your model, you will be honored as a hero.

Kim and I continue to marvel at the providential course guiding our lives. We are hopeful and excited as Kim continues to recover. She still is in a wheelchair, but is becoming more independent and self-assured. Fortunately, she doesn't have any spinal cord damage so her potential for continued recovery is not known. Her dream is to walk again: a goal she continues to work toward.

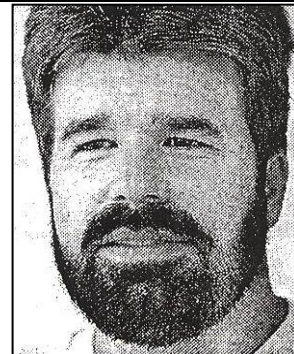
Kim refuses to surrender to her disability. Her willingness to continue the fight when giving up would be easier prompts a respect and admiration from me. My wife is my inspiration, a motivation and model which provides a standard for my life. And that makes my wife my hero.

About the essayist

Bob VerBurg likes to spend time "thinking and philosophizing". His philosophy on heroes: "Heroic actions don't necessarily make heroes. You need to examine the motivation of a heroic action to identify the true hero. Heroes are ordinary people who commit themselves to a higher calling of service."

But to answer that higher calling of service, you have to be looking for opportunities to get involved without regard to any reward for yourself.

For example, when Norm got involved, he didn't know he actually saved a person's life until many years later.



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