

## An Uncommon Hero

Charlie and I had nothing in common other than the fact that we enrolled as students at the same college. I transferred in as a Junior and he was a beginning Freshman. In spite of my superior grade level, Charlie was several years older than me.

While I spent my first two years of college on a campus that was the site of frequent Vietnam war protests, Charlie was a Marine, fighting in the jungles. He was married and had a small daughter but I was single and carefree. He stood more than six feet tall with a muscular build and I was skinny and confined to a wheelchair. Charlie constantly chewed tobacco, a habit he started in high school, and I did not even chew gum.

Our initial meeting was in a Bible class. We both sat in the front of the room for every class. I chose that location because it was easier for parking a wheelchair. Charlie sat in front because he wanted to learn.

Not only was Charlie older and more mature than most of the students, he was also very outspoken. He did not hesitate to express his opinion, even when it conflicted with the professor. There was always the possibility of debate (healthy or otherwise) when Charlie was in the classroom.

The first influence Charlie had on me was to stir my competitive spirit. Charlie always made A's and he challenged me to keep up with his pace. With every graded paper, Charlie wanted to compare scores. Even though he seldom answered incorrectly, I was motivated to keep pace. He would note any question that I had missed and ask why I did not know the correct answer. I must admit that I studied a little harder because I knew Charlie would ask.

Our first semester on campus was Charlie's freshman year. It was traditional that the seniors would spend one of the first weeks of the year initiating the new freshmen. The ritual consisted of requiring a few embarrassing activities and other harmless fun. Early in the week, Charlie was walking across campus when a senior, would should have known better given their size difference, called out to Charlie and called him a "Freshman Slime." Charlie quickly turned around and stuck his massive frame in the senior's face. He asked, "What did you call me?"

Charlie had obviously learned the art of intimidation very well during his days as a Marine. Word spread quickly around campus that Charlie was not participating in the initiation ritual.

Charlie took a very heavy load of classes and completed the four year requirements in two and a half years. He also worked a full-time job in order to provide for his family. When college was finished my experiences with Charlie were just beginning. We chose to attend the same seminary for graduate work and found ourselves together in Louisville, Kentucky.

Sharon and I lived on campus and Charlie and his family rented a house several blocks away. We would visit occasionally and enjoyed our time with he and Rhonda, his wife. Charlie was a remarkable sight on campus. He was probably the only person on the seminary campus who drove a Ford pickup, wore a cowboy hat and boots, and chewed tobacco.

One of the few classes Charlie and I enjoyed together was a practical ministry class. We were required to serve in a supervised ministry position. The class would meet once a week to share experiences and to learn from the mistakes of others.

I was the only one in the class who really knew Charlie. Everyone else on campus thought he was nothing more than a backwards hick from Texas. Unless someone took the time to get to know Charlie, the fact that he was probably one of the most intelligent people on campus was well hidden underneath his rough exterior.

As the class was meeting on one particular afternoon, a young man who was working as a youth minister began to share a difficult experience. He went on and on about

a problem with a young girl in the youth group who seemed to have a romantic crush on him. He did not know how to handle the problem and needed some help.

I don't think he was as interested in advice as he was in bragging about how a teenager found him attractive. After several minutes he made a fatal mistake in his description of the incident. Describing the young girl, he said, ". . . and she's really not very attractive."

Charlie immediately pounced on his blunder and loudly said, "You're no prize pig yourself!"

The class sat in stunned silence while I rolled with laughter. They failed to see the humor in the young man's dilemma but Charlie had obviously discerned the student's problem and dealt a serious blow to his pride.

Charlie had a continual problem in the neighborhood where he lived. Someone frequently broke into his pickup, looking for valuables. In order to catch the culprit, Charlie devised a very clever plan. He connected an electric fence charger to his pickup, sending an electric current through anyone who happened to come into contact with the metal. His plan worked. Charlie heard a commotion outside one night and ran out to find the potential robber lying on the street in pain. He apprehended the young thief and handed him over to the police.

A month or so after the arrest, Charlie was confronted by the young man as he was leaving the grocery store. He stood in Charlie's path and threatened, "I haven't forgotten what you did and neither will your wife and children!"

Unfazed by these words, Charlie carefully sat his groceries aside, doubled his fist and punched the young thug in the stomach. As he walked away he uttered, "I haven't forgotten either!" That was his last encounter with the young man.

After our first year at seminary, Charlie moved to the country to pastor a small church in Waddy, Kentucky. Sharon and I, along with other friends from school made several visits to Charlie and his wife, always making sure to visit the church.

We arrived one afternoon to find Charlie working on a project in the backyard. While Sharon visited with Rhonda, I went outside to see what Charlie was making. It looked like he was working on a casket and when I inquired, I discovered he was indeed preparing for a funeral.

When I asked who he was going to bury, he replied that it was a funeral for the Wednesday Night Service. When I asked for an explanation, he said that it was dead so he might as well bury it.

True to his word, the very next Sunday, Charlie held a funeral service for the Wednesday Night Service, complete with a casket. Needless to say, it was not well received by some of the church members but he certainly made a point.

I call Charlie a hero, not because of his escapades which were always entertaining as well as startling, but because of the qualities of his character. Heroes should be chosen based on who they are and not because of what they accomplish.

Perhaps the one word that comes to mind when I think of Charlie is integrity. There was no pretense about Charlie. He did not act differently for certain people but he was the same for everyone. When Charlie expressed an opinion, you always knew that was exactly what he thought.

Another quality that I admired about Charlie was his commitment to be the best. I do not know if it was an attribute he developed in the military or earlier in life, but Charlie was compelled to do his best. Consequently, he succeeded at everything he tried. Not only was he successful, but he energized me to follow his lead.

The most important reason that Charlie is my hero is the fact that I became a better person because he was my friend. Because he was so different from others, it was not always considered flattering to be Charlie's friend, but I always regarded it an honor. Helping others become better people is the most lofty accomplishment in life.