**FEATURE WRITING**

**When lives collide**

**Culpeper Star-Exponent (VA)** - Saturday, July 14, 2007

***Author:*** *Rob Humphreys / Culpeper Star Exponent*

The state trooper remembers it well, that cold, fateful morning Jan. 4, 1990. Driving southbound on Route 229 across the Hazel River bridge, Fred Bream watched helplessly as an oncoming Plymouth hit a patch of ice, crossed lanes and collided violently with his patrol car.

"It's just a shame it had to happen," Bream said. "Pretty young girl."

Bream suffered a cracked sternum but returned to his job in the safety division of the Virginia State Police.

Nineteen-year-old Shana Nicholson fared much worse, never recovering from a coma that left her in a vegetative state.

On June 21, Nicholson died at Culpeper Health and Rehabilitation Center. After 17½ years of clinging to life with the help of her grandmother and a devoted caregiver, her brittle body - a shadow of her bubbly childhood at Culpeper County High School - finally gave out.

She was 37.

Nicholson's story is a case of contrasts, the before-and-after of a split-second tragedy that crippled a beautiful young woman and altered the lives of those around her.

How it happened

Shana (pronounced "Shauna") was born in Arlington Feb. 25, 1970. She moved to Culpeper a few years before graduating from CCHS in 1988. Maternal grandmother Marian Panzera and her husband, John, raised Nicholson and watched as she developed a love of 4-H and equestrian activities.

Nicholson turned that passion into a job; she would travel to other people's farms and tend to their horses. On the morning of the wreck, she was heading to a farm in Fauquier County.

Witnesses describe the Hazel River as the freezing line that day. Road conditions south of the bridge were generally OK. But when northbound motorists began crossing that long, low span, a sheet of black ice made driving treacherous.

Master Trooper Bream, now 62, recalls seeing Nicholson's car pull out from behind traffic as if attempting to pass. "All of a sudden, she hit some ice and started sliding sideways," said Bream, who has 34 years of service with the State Police.

"She didn't have her safety belt on. That probably would have saved her."

Rescue crews flew Nicholson to the University of Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville, where she remained unresponsive for four months. With recovery impossible, she was taken to her home at 15105 Douglas St. in Culpeper. There, she required 24-hour care for the remainder of her life.

Two lives collide

Teresa Sheppard knew Shana Nicholson in high school. They graduated together and would say hello in the hallways.

"We weren't best friends," Sheppard said. "We just knew of each other."

At the time of Nicholson's wreck, Sheppard had already begun a career in the home health profession.

"When they first asked me to take this job," she said, "I didn't want to take it. I wanted to remember Shana like she was in high school. But then the spirit comes over you and says, 'This is your calling. This is what you were meant to do.'"

And for the past 17 years, Sheppard, now 38, stuck to that calling with a vigorous devotion and love. Each day, she spent at least eight hours at Nicholson's bedside. Then, she would leave her husband and two children to drive back for nightly checkups.

All the while, Sheppard, grandmother Panzera - known affectionately as "Meme" - and a handful of nurses tended to Nicholson's every need. They kept daily journals with hourly logs of Nicholson's schedule. They bathed her, fed her, changed her clothes, stretched her limbs, sang to her. Whatever it took to make her comfortable and keep hope alive.

"I truly believed I would be one of the ones to bring her out of this state," Sheppard said. "I saw that when I was there that she was OK, she was fine. And I knew that I gave her just as much joy as she gave me."

Sheppard compared Nicholson's condition to that of Terry Schiavo, the Florida woman who drew international headlines when her husband won a court battle to end her life two years ago.

Nicholson could moan, blink her eyes and had a limited range of motion in her extremities. But even in a semi-comatose condition, her mind functioned rather well.

"Just coming in and looking at her," Sheppard said of Nicholson's mental ability, "you'd think there was nothing there. But there was something there."

A family fades away

Grandma Meme was like a mother to Nicholson. After the wreck, she and John Panzera devoted their lives to caring for their granddaughter.

"Shana never went without," said Sheppard, adding that without the help of her grandparents, Nicholson likely would have died much sooner.

Sadly, all the important people in Nicholson's life slowly faded away - from family members to a three-year boyfriend who moved on, married and started a family in Maryland.

Nicholson's mother, Sharyn, died of breast cancer in 1998.

After the wreck, Nicholson's father, Dana, had little interaction with his daughter. Sheppard said he disappeared six or seven years ago, and no one has seen him since.

John Panzera, her step-grandfather, died in 1997.

But the toughest blow came Oct. 25, 2006, when Meme died of a heart attack at the age of 81.

"There was a lot of stress on her all these years," Sheppard said of Nicholson's grandmother, "and her heart couldn't take it anymore. … That lady worked and worked and devoted her life to Shana. There will never be another grandma like her. She gave up everything."

Nicholson cried when Sheppard told her of Meme's passing.

With Nicholson's mother, grandmother and step-grandfather no longer alive, Sheppard had little choice but to put her best friend and patient into a nursing home.

"It was too much for one person 24/7," Sheppard said, comparing Nicholson to a flower that needed special attention to survive. "When she got into that nursing home, that flower started to die. … Now I feel like half of me is gone."

No more pain

On June 24, about 20 people attended Nicholson's private memorial service.

They remembered the girl who once had so much spunk. The girl who loved her horse "Budweiser," loved stylish clothes and parties. The girl who told her mom the day before the wreck that she had found her calling - she would study to become a paralegal. The girl whose life essentially had two deaths, separated by nearly two decades.

On that warm Sunday afternoon, such a contrast to the icy morning of Feb. 4, 1990, mourners sprinkled Nicholson's ashes beside her mother's grave in Rappahannock County, the same place where Meme's ashes have become one with the earth.

Mother.

Daughter.

Grandmother.

Resting in peace after years of pain.

"Shana was just kind of stuck in that body," Sheppard said from the small living room in her house that still bears many of Nicholson's keepsakes - a small rocking horse, cassette tapes, journals, photos, high school yearbooks and newspaper clippings. "Now she's finally happy and set free."

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People affected by the accident

Shana Nicholson: A graduate of Culpeper County High School, she was 19 when her car collided with a state trooper Jan. 4, 1990, on Route 229. The wreck left her semi-comatose with no chance of recovery. Shana had a horse-sitting business, waited tables at Davis Street Ordinary (now Hazel River Inn) and wanted to become a paralegal. She died last month at the age of 37.

Fred Bream: The Virginia State Police master trooper whose car Nicholson hit when crossing the Hazel River bridge recovered from a broken sternum and filed a $250,000 lawsuit. Bream, now 62, recently said the lawsuit "was strictly done to reimburse the state for my loss of pay and for the damages to the car and stuff like that. The state went after the insurance company (not the family). I caught a lot of criticism because I had taken her to court, and I had to. As far as I know, she didn't pay one red cent because I told my attorney, if she does I'll cancel my suit."

Teresa Sheppard: She graduated from CCHS in 1988 with Nicholson, but they were only acquaintances. After Nicholson's wreck, Sheppard became her primary caregiver. She stayed in that capacity until Nicholson's death, serving 17 years at the bedside of her newfound friend and "real-life baby doll." Sheppard was Nicholson's guardian in the final months.

Marian Panzera: Nicholson's maternal grandmother raised the girl and provided care in her home on Douglas Street until dying Oct. 25, 2006. Her husband (Nicholson's step-grandfather) was John Panzera. He died in 1997.

Sharyn Nicholson: The mother of Shana Nicholson died of breast cancer in 1998. She has a 27-year-old daughter, Summer Craig, who is Nicholson's stepsister. Craig, who was 10 at the time of the wreck, lives in Glen Allen. She is Nicholson's closest living relative.

Dana Nicholson: Shana's father separated from the family and rarely visited his daughter after the wreck. Six or seven years ago, he "disappeared," according to Sheppard.

Aric Conto: Nicholson's boyfriend at the time of the accident was left in a difficult predicament. He eventually moved to Maryland, married and started a family. In Nicholson's online guestbook at foundandsons.com, Conto wrote, "She wasn't just a big part of my life then, she was everything in my life. She will be truly missed and always remembered in my heart."

Whatever happened to Aric Conto-

Shana Nicholson began dating Aric Conto as a senior in high school. He was two years older. The two were madly in love, he said last week from his home in Northeast, Md. They had even spoken about marriage.

Shortly after Nicholson graduated Culpeper County High School in 1988, they moved in together. They lived in Culpeper and Warrenton before moving to Deland, Fla., in the summer of 1989. There, they rented a house from Nicholson's father, Dana.

A few months later, Nicholson got homesick and the two returned to Culpeper.

Then came the morning of the wreck.

Conto was driving a truck for Updike Industries when wrecker Barry Jenkins stopped him in town. "I didn't realize it," Conto said, "but he had actually pulled me over with her car on the wrecker."

Conto, now 39, hung on for as long as he could. He spent weeks at her hospital bedside in Charlottesville, then helped care for her in Culpeper. About a year after the accident, the frequency of his visits slowed. Several months later, he quit visiting. With caregiver Teresa Sheppard doing such a good job, he said, "I felt better about not being involved in the scene as much."

"It's hard to explain," he continued, "but at the time I felt like I wasn't able to move ahead with my life. I had no ambition, no desire. … There came a point where I finally had to wean myself away."

Conto, who sells industrial and agricultural equipment, married in 1996. He has a 5-year-old daughter and a child due in early September. But he still holds a place in his heart for Shana, even visiting her in the nursing home two months before she died.

"We had quite a history," he said. "We had a good relationship. We had our troubles, just like anyone else. …

"It's been 20 years, but at the time - when you're in love in your late teens and early 20s - there's nothing like it."

- Rob Humphreys

**Fallen, but not forgotten**

**Culpeper Star-Exponent (VA)** - Wednesday, August 8, 2007

***Author:*** *Rob Humphreys / Culpeper Star Exponent*

In Virginia, few people know of Wallace Horton. In a small pocket of Belgium, he's a hero.

Horton, a 19-year-old soldier from Clifton Forge, died liberating the town of Fouron-le-Comte on Sept. 12, 1944. Yet his memory lives on as one of several thousand American GIs who swept through western Europe on their way to Berlin - and victory in World War II.

Now, his nephew and a newfound friend are helping the next generation of Belgians connect to their past.

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For years, Culpeper's Lanny Horton heard family members talk about his uncle who never made it home from the war.

Then, about two years ago, he got a phone call from a researcher with the Army's 30th Division, also known as Old Hickory. "There's a guy in Belgium," Horton recalled the man saying, "who wants to talk to someone from the family."

That man was Vincent Heggen, a World War II enthusiast from the same town where Wallace Horton had fallen. After extensive research to find a living relative, Heggen wanted to know if the two were related.

Yes, Horton replied. He was my father's younger brother.

Heggen was ecstatic.

The two struck up a friendship over the Internet, often e-mailing and sharing stories about the only American soldier to die in Fouron-le-Comte.

Come to find out, Heggen, a 40-year-old father of three girls, had devoted his life to honoring the men who liberated his town some 63 years ago. And Heggen, who runs a World War II museum not far from where Wallace Horton died at the hands of a Nazi machine gun, was about to dedicate a monument to the 30th Division.

Naturally, he wanted Lanny Horton to be there.

So Horton, 64, took time off from his job as director of missions at Shiloh Baptist Association. He couldn't make the official dedication May 26, but he and his wife, Sheila, got there a month later, spending their 25th wedding anniversary with Heggen and his family in Fouron-le-Comte June 28 and 29.

"In the village," Horton said of his uncle, "he's been revered as a hero. They're grateful for the Americans who liberated their town."

In a symbolic way, Heggen has essentially become part of the Horton family. He's even adopted Wallace Horton's grave, one of 7,800 in the nearby Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery.

"It's our duty," Heggen wrote via e-mail, "to remember what all those young guys, coming from overseas, did so many years ago. They gave up their precious young years to help us defeat the Nazism and to give us the most important things in a Democratic world: freedom and liberty of expression.

Heggen is proud of his monument, which prominently features the distinct Old Hickory logo beside the name, division and company of Wallace J. Horton. But he's even prouder of the "friendship between American and Belgian people."

"May they never be forgotten," Heggen said of the fallen soldiers who helped change the course of history.

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Several residents of Fouron-le-Comte were killed during the Nazi occupation. And many GIs from Old Hickory received awful wounds liberating the town.

But for decades, the people of Fouron-le-Comte did not know the history of the lone soldier who died in their streets.

"I decided to research who was that man," Heggen said. "After two years of research, I concluded that Wallace Horton of Alleghany County, Clifton Forge, Va., was killed in my village."

Pinning down Horton's identity, Heggen continued, "was a great long work. There was no monument to honor our liberators in town. It was high time to make this right. A monument was set up at the place where Wallace was killed."

Frank Towers, the 90-year-old president of the 30th Association, attended the dedication. Towers, Heggen said, "participated in all the major battles of the Old Hickory Division: from Normandy until the entire collapse of the Third Reich."

Dozens of town residents also showed up, some of whom remember the day Wallace Horton died. Town resident Maria Kurvers-Habets was 9 years old when she saw the young American's body lying in the street outside her window. She still lives in the same house.

And then there's Heggen's 75-year-old father.

"I can ask him what he did yesterday," Heggen said, "he is unable to answer me. But I can ask him about the liberation or when the Germans invaded Belgium, he remembers everything of it."

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**Half a century of journalism history in our backyard**

**Culpeper Star-Exponent (VA)** - Saturday, March 31, 2007

***Author:*** *Rob Humphreys / Culpeper Star Exponent*

When it comes to Culpeper's newspaper history, Russell Carder has seen it all.

Well, almost.

Carder, 85, started at the weekly Culpeper Star-Exponent in 1953. That's when the Virginia Star merged with the Culpeper Exponent.

Ten years later, the paper became a daily.

Now that the Star-Exponent is moving to a new building at 471 James Madison Highway, Carder has mixed feelings.

"Well, it's necessary," he said from his home on West Edmonson Street, a stone's throw from his former place of employment.

"Like anything else, when you start to getter bigger, time to get more room."

For 51 years, Carder operated a giant camera that put images of cut-and-paste pages onto film. In the late 1990s, technology made that process obsolete.

And by the time Carder retired in 2004, the media landscape had changed tremendously. But after all these years, Carder's sharp memory and gift of gab haven't changed a bit.

"Did you know I helped move most of that stuff in there-" he asked, pointing from his front porch to the Star-Exponent building.

Carder was referring to the newspaper's printing press, which moved from a building on South Main Street to its current location in 1960.

That 47-year-old press will remain at 122 W. Spencer St., but the building is slated for a renovation later this year.

"It was so convenient," Carder said about walking to work. "It's just like I had to get up in the morning, go over there and continue on."

Carder remembers the businesses that once occupied what is now the Star-Exponent location. Two separate buildings - one was a Safeway grocery store and the other a car dealership - stood side by side. In the early 1980s, Carder said, they were connected and renovated to the building's current appearance.

Little has changed since, including Carder's wide grin.

He smiles as he recalls the newspaper's four owners since 1951 - Walter Potter, Lynchburg-based Glass Newspapers, Charlottesville-based Worrell and Richmond-based Media General.

He also recalls one night in 1975 when the Washington Post's pressmen went on strike and the paper had to be partially printed in Culpeper.

"One of the most surprising memories was when Mr. Potter called me one Saturday night and asked me if I wanted to work," Carder said.

For over a week, Carder and printing presses in Fredericksburg, Woodbridge and Winchester assembled the Washington Post.

"We printed that thing up here," Carder said with a laugh, motioning across the street.

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**Pearl Sample strikes gold**

**Culpeper Star-Exponent (VA)** - Friday, November 16, 2007

***Author:*** *Rob Humphreys / Culpeper Star Exponent*

When Carrie Underwood left a voicemail at Pearl Sample Elementary School, assistant principal Cathy Timmons suspected a prank.

Turns out, the caller wasn't joking.

OK, so it wasn't the Carrie Underwood of "American Idol" fame. But the name carries importance, nonetheless.

Underwood is deputy director of policy and projects for the office of Laura Bush. She wanted to know if the fifth-grade class of Alicia Marsh would do the White House a favor.

You see, on Monday, the First Lady is commemorating a new line of collectible coins, the first ever to honor a series of women. And she needs a little help to pull it off.

That's where Pearl Sample comes in.

As part of the press conference for the "First Spouse Gold Coin Program," Marsh's 20 fifth-graders will join a Dolley Madison re-enactor at 9:30 a.m. in the East Room of the White House. One lucky student, Carlynn Walker, actually gets to introduce the re-enactor and provide tidbits about Madison's life.

"I'm very excited," said 10-year-old Carlynn. "I know my classmates are too."

Carlynn, who calls this the biggest day of her life, can't wait to meet the First Lady. Her mom, Ann Walker, will make the early morning trip to D.C. along with her daughter.

"I think it's wonderful," Walker said. "I'm real proud that Pearl Sample and Mrs. Marsh's class was chosen. I am very proud of Carlynn as well."

Marsh said she selected Carlynn, who has attended Pearl Sample since kindergarten, because "she has a delightful personality and was willing to do it when asked."

Assistant principal Timmons said the White House selected her school after calling Montpelier (home of fourth president James Madison and his wife, Dolley). A Montpelier representative who works in the education unit suggested Marsh, who has taken her classes on several field trips to the Madison estate over the years.

Then came the call from Carrie Underwood.

"I have to tell you," Timmons said, "when I got the phone message, I wasn't sure it was real. … But when I did call her and talked to her, I thought, 'Wow, this is real!' "

When students learned the news, "If you could have seen their faces," Timmons said, "it was priceless."

As for the half-ounce, pure gold coins, they are expensive … but not priceless.

According to the U.S. Mint, the First Spouse Gold Coins are the companion coins to the circulating presidential $1 coins.

onday's press conference will mark the debut of the Dolley Madison coin, which becomes available at noon that day.

The coins are being released in the order that the First Ladies' husbands were in office.

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