

Testimonials Are Us

What the Knowles Know Now

By Bonnie Burks Gray

On a sunny afternoon, Thanksgiving week, I had the blessing of visiting with the Knowles, Judy and Mark. The focus of this story is on Judy Murley Knowles, with insight from her husband and best friend, Mark.

We begin Judy's story where she began, in a small, traditionally rural community of Leslie. (Actually, Judy always tells people she's from Burkesville, KY, so they can find her stomping grounds on the map.) There the church was the center of activity and everybody knew you and your kin and vice-versa. Her home church Leslie United Methodist was down (or maybe up) the road from her home and her grandfather and his son, Judy's daddy, helped build it.

During its prime of Sunday-go-to-meeting services with lunch on the grounds, Judy and her three sisters and one brother were the stand-out kids of the 30 or so membered church. "We went every Sunday and every time the doors were open, including those two week revivals," recalled Judy. Mark reminded her, they went to the altar every time there was an altar call, too. Judy laughs, "Yeah, we were expected to go." The church still serves, but its attendees now number closer to 10 regulars.

The farmer's daughter knows about hard work, sweat-of-the-brow work, helping in the family tobacco crop and with other shared chores. She knows, too, about helping others. She learned that role from all in her family, but especially her mother. Mary Ruth Murley raised her children while serving as the bookmobile lady, driving up and down the narrow roads through Cumberland County's hills for over 34 years.

The family's river bottom farm sits in an elbow of the Cumberland River in the flood zone of the infamous Wolf Creek Dam which from 2007 – 2015 was deemed unsafe. The Army Corps of Engineers' emergency shoring up of the dam in the interim has upgraded its failure status to "significantly reduced".

Judy and her family are pioneer-stock and they took that entire dam scare in stride, even joking about how fast the water would hit the upper-bottom of their farm should it break. Their cavalier stance may come from growing up playing in the river. When chores were done and childhood play was too rambunctious, Mrs. Murley would tell her five to "go to the river". Judy, who says this about fishing, "No. Never went fishing. I've never caught a fish. I like to get in the water, but I don't care to fish." So Judy with her siblings and cousins, who lived nearby, created their river exploits and played the day away. The cousin's raft would carry them down the river out of sight of anyone and there were countless adventures to imagine by the river bank.

But summers end, kids grow-up and one day, after Judy graduated from Cumberland County High, she took off to Berea College. A college class in child development gave her an opportunity to do volunteer work with children with disabilities. The work inspired her to earn a bachelor of science in psychology. A slight change in course from her chemistry major when she entered college, but a change that gave her a career path she thrived in. Later Judy would earn her master's degree in public administration. Judy, reflected with a laugh



Mark & Judy Knowles

and a smile toward Mark, “I intended to get my doctor’s degree, but I got married and completely forgot about that.”

From Berea, Judy went to work for Oakwood Training Center in Somerset, KY. Her career there spanned over 10 years as she moved from the “cottage teacher and had 12 resident girls (who had intellectual disabilities)” to one of the supervisors. Her work at Oakwood led her to move to Frankfort as a Regional Coordinator for the Division of Mental Retardation. Later she would become assistant director of the Division. “Then I retired,” grins Judy. “Oh, happy day.”

Bonnie: “Judy, why did you retire so young?”

Judy: “Because I had a child. Joshua was in the 7th grade and retiring had been my goal since the day he was born. And that worked out well. We were able to spend a lot of time together. I had him when I was 40 years old.”

Bonnie: “I might not put your age in the testimonial.”

Judy: “That’s Okay, I don’t care. I tell everybody.”

Bonnie: “Okay. So somewhere along the way you met Mark?”

Judy: “Blind date.” Laughing, “I’m still friends with the friend that fixed us up.”

Judy remembers telling her colleagues at the office, as she hurried off to meet her lunch date at Jim’s Seafood, “I’m going to get a free meal today.” When she returned, the pleasantly surprised Judy told her friends, “We really hit it off!”

Judy: “We got married in ’91.”

Mark: “I thought it was ’81.”

Judy: “No. Josh was born in ’93. We’ve only been married 25 years.”

With a tone of resignation Judy sighs, smiles, telling Mark, “You don’t know any of our stuff.”



Joshua, Mark, Judy Knowles

Well, Mark might not remember all of their “stuff”, but he does remember that their lives recently took a dramatic change from their routine. The former auditor of Internal Auditing for the KY Department of Revenue, retired in 2015. Since then he and Judy had been able to spend a little time traveling, working on their property on the Bellview Road, and visiting family. Their son Joshua, who is in his last year of studies in computer information systems at the University

of Louisville, lives in Louisville. The Knowles were looking forward to having more time to spend with Josh and to do those other things you work toward, including continuing to serve in their home church, Centenary. Judy is active in the Friendship Class and serves with Congregational Care. Mark, our former church treasurer, is a member of the Seekers Class and serves on the Prayer Team.

But stuff happens and life gets interrupted as it did on April 6th. Judy had just finished preparing supper and suddenly felt queasy. In minutes she was very ill and in tremendous pain, “I told Mark, ‘I gotta get to the ER.’ I had never felt such pain as what I was then.”

Judy remembers when they got to the ER in Shelbyville everyone in the waiting room reacted. Seeing how violently ill she was, the occupants all scattered. “They didn’t want to get the flu they thought I had.”

Judy went through the battery of tests that go with a trip to the emergency room and then some, but the doctors had no diagnosis, they could only admit her for more tests. Despite Judy’s vomiting and acute pain, “the doctors didn’t know how serious it was,” laments Mark.

“I was in terrible pain from my stomach all the way to my back. Constant pain. It did not let up. I’ve been through child birth, breast cancer, but never pain where there was no relief,” said Judy. She kept begging for pain medicine, anything to help her cope with the excruciating pain. This was just the beginning of a nightmare that lasted for six weeks. A bad dream Judy remembers only in snatches. Judy thinks, “I remember maybe two weeks out of the 5½ weeks.” Mark, however, remembers every terrifying detail.

Judy was five days in Shelbyville; they admitted her to the cardiac care unit so she could have constant attention. No improvement there, they moved Judy to downtown Jewish. For days she could have no food, no fluids, not even ice chips. To restore her nutrition the doctors ran a feeding tube to her stomach through her nose. She’d have to endure that ordeal twice through her illness.

Judy’s not sure the number of cat scans, MRIs, blood work, EKGs, and other tests she had, “a bunch” is a safe guess. She developed blood clots, developed short term diabetes, allergies to the antibiotics and despite the heaps of pain medication barely had “50% relief” from the agony. Before her ordeals were over she would be shuttled back in forth from hospitals to home then back by ambulance to another hospital ER, the last time to Baptist East. Mark believes that was where they found the right combination of doctors, diagnoses and compassionate, capable care. One time he told some of us, “they saved her life”. Judy’s battle went on for nearly two months.

At some point, Judy was finally diagnosed with pancreatic necrosis. Getting that diagnosis put treatment steps in place that started turning her, painfully, slowly, in the right direction. During her illness, Judy would have tubes surgically inserted directly to her stomach, intestines, pancreas to drain away the infection.

Somewhere online I found this description of her diagnosis:

Pancreatic necrosis is a serious life-threatening infection of the pancreas usually associated with a blockage within the biliary tract, long-term alcohol use, or arising from an unknown cause. Patients who are not treated surgically to drain the pancreatic infection face systemic infection (sepsis) and, ultimately, death. *More than 80% of deaths amongst patients with acute pancreatitis are caused by infection of the dead pancreatic tissue.*

The mystery remains, the cause. The funny – now -- thought is that the lady, who rarely ever touched even a wine cooler, would be the victim of this condition. Other causes: gall bladder (had hers removed years ago), high cholesterol (nana), that could be the catalyst were impossible in her case. A virus is one theory that is still possible. Either way, Judy’s on a low-fat diet now and trying to get her taste buds back as she works to regain some weight. Of course, the irony of that, after spending her life working to control her weight is not lost on

her now. There's still a debate how much weight she lost during her ordeal 12 pounds for sure, probably more. But not the 40 pounds one nurse declared.

One morning at Baptist East, Judy was in so much pain she begged her surgeon to please help. Her feet were burning so much the pain was unbearable. He calmly told her he was a surgeon and the only thing he could do was to cut them off, but he knew she didn't want that. Blisters were forming on the palms of her hands, the bottom of her feet; this was a whole new struggle against pain and to find the cause of these complications.

The infectious disease doctor came in and told them to stop everything, remove the IVs, and take her off all the antibiotics. "Stop everything," he yelled. "Get her off EVERYTHING. GET HER OFF EVERYTHING **RIGHT NOW!**" The nurses couldn't work fast enough to suit him. Judy, the doctor realized, was suffering from Red man syndrome, an allergic reaction to the antibiotic, amoxicillin, they were giving her. She was once again in a very bad place.

Judy remembers a visit by the same infectious disease doctor, she's still trying to recall his name, a day or so later, "I told him, 'you saved me.' He answered, 'No. No. No.' Then he pointed straight up and said, 'God saved you. He gave us,' pointing to the nurses, and himself, 'the tools to help.'"

Judy thinks of the incident now and is thankful for his words. Judy was not afraid of death, but her horrific pain was so relentless, she felt she could not reach God. That was the worst part of all.

"Every moment was night time. We kept the room 65°. The blinds were closed. Pain was a big black thing," explains Judy. "It was this round, black thing. If I could just get rid of that thing, (that barrier) I could get to God . . . No matter what I couldn't get to God." Extending her hand in front of her to illustrate, "I knew, he's right there, but I can't get to God."

Trying to understand what was happening as she endeavors to describe it, Judy said, "I don't feel like I went to hell. I know I didn't do that. There was one point, because the pain was so intense and everything seemed so dark around me, I remember thinking, 'Did I go to hell? What went wrong? Something had to go wrong. What did I do wrong? Is this a permanent state of pain?'"

Thankfully those moments of despair were overcome because of Judy's foundation in Christ, built first by the home church of the little girl growing up in Cumberland County. She knew that nothing could separate her from the love and salvation of Christ, not even mind-blowing pain.

Leaving the darkness of her pain, Judy sees with new eyes, "Our main goal in life is to get back to God. Even when I felt I couldn't reach God, I knew I was never separated from God." In reflection, Judy knows the sense of separation she had during her battle with pain was the result of a combination of the medications, the length of her sickness, the crippling pain, the depression and despair that were overcoming her.

"I remember Willard, (Pastor Knipp) coming to see me", explained Judy. "I told him I was afraid. I was so sick (in so much pain), I couldn't pray anymore."

Willard said, "You don't need to worry about that. We've (Centenary family) got that covered. You just need to work on getting better." Judy added, "He'll never know how much Mark and I appreciated his encouragement, reassurance. Everyone was so supportive."

Bonnie: "Mark, how about you? How were you coping with all of this?"

Mark: "Believe it or not I was optimistic. I woke up each morning saying 'She's gonna be better today.' There was a time I was so mad at one hospital over the uncaring service we were getting I dreaded going in, but I stayed hopeful all the time. When Judy had to have the nose tube inserted, I looked the procedure up on the internet and I cried."

Mark, ever optimistic, still had his fearful moments, too. “There were times I was just scared she wasn’t going to make it. I felt so sorry for her. She couldn’t do anything, not even sleep. She was hooked up to all those tubes and monitors, in so much pain. And there was nothing I could do.” Despite his fears Mark drove each day to the hospital “knowing this is the day, she’ll be better”. Their friends, even their family might have wondered, but Mark was convinced, in his heart he knew she would recover.

Mark recalls, “I went to the chapel at one hospital, knelt down on my knees and prayed for a long time. I remember kneeling down, praying and then going to her hospital room and finding Judy well enough she was actually wearing pajamas that day. But that only lasted one morning.” Judy’s condition roller-coasted through the infection. It would be weeks before she could give up the hospital gown again.

In the midst of all this, there was a church family that had work to do. They couldn’t make a diagnosis and they knew the patient could not handle visitors, but there were other things to do. Things like mow the Knowles’ grass, water the plants, repair the lawn mower, and check with Mark for updates to share with the congregation. They sent words of encouragement through cards, lots and lots of cards. Most importantly, were their prayers. Church-wide, Judy and Mark were prayed for. Community-wide prayers were solicited. World-wide prayers were lifted to God on Judy’s behalf. There were times when some of us feared the worse. Prayer was so fervent then. It was all we could do. It was the only thing worth doing.

Recover she has, although, she is still working at being fully back to normal. Being immobile for so many weeks, Judy was surprised how much muscle strength she lost. Even walking was difficult with severe muscle spasms being just one of her challenges. Mark smiles remembering, “When she first started to walk our road to the mailbox, I would walk behind her carrying a chair.” Now she’s going almost full throttle.

Here’s something to note, for the Knowles, Judy’s illness, the pain, their struggles, as difficult as they were, have turned into gifts. Mark and Judy believe it’s a gift to have their faith in others strengthened. “People were so kind to us,” explained Judy. “We could not have asked for anything more from our church. Centenary was wonderful. The Congregational Care Team and everyone else were so good to us.”

Judy said her, “faith in God now is tremendous”. Her illness, “has given me a lot of things. I believe I am much more compassionate toward people with chronic pain. My pain was so unbearable there were times I wanted to die, but I was never afraid to die at any time. I believe you have to have faith to get through an ordeal like this. I couldn’t feel God before (her illness), the way I feel God right now. I couldn’t bridge the gap (imagined during her pain) but God could.”

Judy says, “To my Church, I really don’t have the words to express how appreciative I am of everything, what everybody did for me. I really don’t. People were so kind. I even had people last Sunday ask me how I was doing.”

Judy weathered a storm of pain and illness. In the sunlight and warmth of day, she shares, “I think the thing that I have learned from all of this is that life is very fragile. That we are not promised even one more hour. My faith in people and the power of prayer has been reaffirmed. **I’ve learned the importance of being part of a larger group of Christians . . . because they will pray for you, when you can’t pray for yourself.**”

James 5: 13-15 (NIV) 13 Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. 15 And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.