

The good life

Stricken with a fatal disease, Rich Brooks remained stubbornly courageous.

Rich Brooks died on May 7 of this year after a long battle with ALS, better known as Lou Gehrig's Disease. He was my husband, and one of the most courageous and determined people I have known.

Rich was an award-winning journalist for the *Herald-Tribune* in Sarasota, Fla. After he was diagnosed, he began to write poignant, funny columns about topics as mundane as doing the laundry and as personal as choosing to live on a ventilator rather than accept death.



Kathy Brooks

Although Rich and I both grew up in Columbus, our paths didn't cross until after we had graduated from Ohio State, he in 1975 and I a year earlier. Not long after our courtship began, Rich joined VISTA, the domestic arm of the Peace Corps, and moved to Los Angeles. We married the following December.

Rich eventually became city editor for a newspaper in Burbank, Calif. Our first son, Noah, was born in 1986. Later that year, we moved to Florida after Rich was offered the job of assistant city editor at the *Herald-Tribune*.

In 1990, he was promoted to Venice bureau chief and we welcomed our second son, Nathaniel. Life was good.

Five years later, Rich was diagnosed.

ALS is a cruel disease. Its victims retain their cognitive functions, but they lose the ability to move, speak, swallow, and, eventually, breathe. There is no cure.

As the disease progressed, Rich embraced various kinds of technology. When he could no longer type, he used voice-recognition software. When his computer could no longer understand his words, he used an infrared switch mounted on his wheelchair to scan the alphabet and select letters. And as he lost the ability to trigger the switch, he sought other means to help him. When he died, he was awaiting technology that would have allowed him to choose letters with brainwaves.

Rich had moments of despair. But he wanted to live so that he could continue to be a part of our family, and because he still had so much to say.

The column reprinted here, which ran on Oct. 9, 2010, is especially bittersweet to me. ■

With love on life's side, the funeral can wait

It's decision time.

To quote the Bard, "To be or not to be: that is the question:

"Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,

"Or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?"

One question that's been bothering me is whether a bed bath is a sling or an arrow.

The funeral I have been planning for myself will have to wait.

I even had a date set for my death.

It was to be Feb. 12, the anniversary of the day my mother left this mortal plane.

But not anymore.

I have decided to live.

Any of you who were planning to attend my funeral should make other plans.

Why live?

Have there been any breakthroughs in treatment of ALS—amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—or its cause?

Yes and no.

A story in the *New York Times* indicated that brain injury may be a likely trigger for the development of ALS-like symptoms.

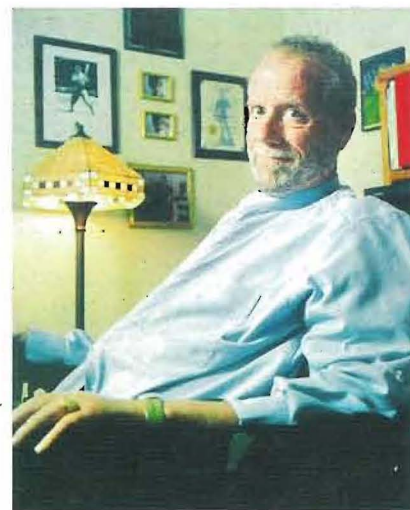
And though technology has made managing those symptoms easier, treatment to reverse, or even halt, the progress of this mysterious disease remains elusive.

Reading the story in the *Times* was like hearing the voice of God telling me that it's nothing personal.

It was a relief to know that the universe wasn't out to get me.

And I could continue being the opinionated, flawed S.O.B. we've all come to know.

ALS attacks the neurons that are attached to muscles, resulting in gradual loss of movement and leading to paralysis and, eventually, respiratory failure.



Rich Brooks

WILLIAM SPEER

The vast majority of those with ALS die within two to five years.

But they aren't vented, as I am, which significantly improves one's lifespan.

And I'm a man in love with my wife as well as my life.

Yes, I fell for my wife.

Maybe it's the way she kisses me lightly on the forehead as she tucks me in at night.

Maybe it's how she holds my hand when we go out.

Or maybe it's the memory I have of me standing in front of the house she rented on Patterson Avenue in Columbus.

There was snow on the ground, and we'd just returned from the Blue Danube restaurant. Then we kissed.

I have other memories, too. But that one is the most vivid.

I was alive for 26 years before we were married.

But if you want to blame someone for keeping me alive, you can blame her. ■

Used with permission of the Sarasota *Herald-Tribune*. Copyright 2010.