

## Red Bags are gifts from the heart

By Carol Layton



“I lived bad for a long time.”

Sonny Westmoreland’s direct gaze, glistening eye, and the raw way he adds, “I put my wife through some hard times,” bespeak a man whose deliverance is not taken for granted. Like his testimony, Westmoreland’s life demonstrates a grateful man who seeks to do good wherever he can – not for atonement but in thankfulness for it – and in hope of sparing others.

Retired for 18 years and widowed for five, 80-year-old Westmoreland does not let grass grow under his feet. Or his neighbor’s for that matter. He stays active helping others – like the frail neighbor whose yard he mows, or the many walk-a-thons he participates in each year – chiefly the annual Relay for Life where he walks one lap for each year since his successful treatment for lung cancer. Last year, that was 29 laps – seven and a quarter miles – and with only one lung. He also is an active deacon at Haymore Memorial Baptist Church in Mount Airy and a volunteer at the local food pantry and clothes closet.

Westmoreland “opens the doors, turns on the lights, and makes the coffee” two evenings each week at a local Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting. “God gave me that program. Now, it’s my obligation to be there for others. You can’t do a lot for people at AA; they have to do it for themselves. But they have to have a place to go; so I keep the doors open for them.”

Westmoreland is frank about the alcohol addiction that threatened his marriage and life. After Jesus Christ, Westmoreland credits his wife Polly for seeing him through. In May of 1972, after 15 years of turmoil, Westmoreland found himself in the Alcohol Recovery Center (ARC) in Butner. Because family dynamics were part of the treatment, Polly was asked to stay at

the ARC for 28 days. “I had given her some pretty hard times, so I told them, ‘She won’t come.’ But she came on a Sunday and stayed. Our kids were eight and nine.”

Retelling a memory from those first days of sobriety still casts a shadow across his face. “They made a movie of the get-acquainted session and showed it to us. I was disgusted to see my nasty attitude.” Afterwards, Westmoreland dropped to his knees and prayed, “If you’re really up there, show me what to do. I never want to be that person again.”

Polly became a Christian as a teenager; Westmoreland’s road was a little longer. After two years of sobriety, he began attending church with Polly. “One Sunday, when they had the altar call, I felt I had to go up. I was baptized in a lake on the side of Turner Mountain in the summer of ‘74.”

The five years since Polly’s passing have been marked by many firsts – the first Christmas, the first anniversary, the first steps of great-grandchildren. Firsts now come further apart. But this spring brought another one – the first time he planted green beans without her. Last Christmas, he opened the last of 27 quarts he’d canned while she gave directions. “That last summer, she wasn’t up to it, so she talked me through it.” The tender green shoots peeking through the cold soil will provide another first later this summer.

“We had the best 39 years anyone could ever have.” The fact that Sonny and Polly were married for 53 years doesn’t lessen his gratefulness for the 39 years when he says he “came closer to giving her the husband she deserved.”

Westmoreland’s service to others is powerful because it stems from a heart connection – like his Red Bag ministry. “I see Red Bags as a way to honor Polly. She worked in a doctor’s office 45 years. If she were living, she would be right here with me, getting them in the hands of people who need them.”

Westmoreland first learned of Red Bags when Martha McDowell, central region director for North Carolina Baptist Aging Ministry (NCBAM) shared “Priority #1: Prevention” programs at his church. “I could see the need for these right away,” says Westmoreland.

He pitched Red Bags as a ministry outreach to his pastor and fellow deacons and they jumped on board. Westmoreland also purchases bags and routinely shares them with others. Deacon Eric Southern, an EMS supervisor, and Westmoreland have spoken on a local radio program sharing medication safety tips such as storing medicines in one place and making them accessible to emergency responders.

Life has offered Westmoreland exceptional opportunities for despair: addiction, cancer, and most recently widowhood. But he has declined each opportunity – choosing instead to

keep trusting God and blessing others. Westmoreland appreciates that each Red Bag he gives away comes with the plan of salvation. “If they are not a Christian, this Red Bag will give them another chance,” concludes Sonny Westmoreland – ever the lover of a good second chance.

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