

— “Do you feel any older today?” —



By Tonya Brantley

For the past eleven years, the month of April has been difficult for me to get through. You see, eleven years ago on April 8th, just two days after my 21st birthday, William Lloyd Brantley, my Pee Paw, passed away. I contemplated writing an article about him this month, but I cannot help but think about so many of the good times the two of us had together and I feel that writing about them will make it easier for me to deal with his loss.

I'll begin this article by telling you about some of the wonderful memories I have of Pee Paw. One of the most vivid and I think most amazing memories I have is him picking me up from school. You see, I never missed a day of school all through elemen-

tary school, junior high and high school. Up until the time I got my own vehicle in high school, Pee Paw picked me up from school every single day. He would always get there early too, I know, because his big white 1973 Chevrolet Caprice Classic was the first in the long line of cars waiting for us "kids" to get out of school.

Every time I'd open the door to that big old car and sit down beside him, he always asked me the same question. "Did you learn anything today?" He always pushed me to tell him, in detail, at least one or more of the subjects I had learned that day. Not only was it a way for me to remember what I had been taught, but it made the bond closer between Pee Paw and I.

When we'd get home from school, he'd tell me to go into his room and get some change out of the dish on top of his dresser and go down to the corner store and get some candy or gum. Pee Paw knew the value of a dollar. Especially when it came to buying red-hots, bubble gum or gobstoppers.

Even in to my adulthood, he would often secretly hand me five, ten or twenty dollars folded up in his hand and say, "Shhh, now don't tell anybody now. Go buy something for yourself."

My brother and I would always spend the afternoons after school and in the summer over at my grandparents house while my mom and dad were at work.

Sometimes, we'd visit

Mr. and Mrs. McCulley's farm and pick butterbeans out of their huge garden then take the bushels home and snap them to get the beans out. Mee Maw would cook them all afternoon until they were just right. When supertime came, Pee Paw and I would have a contest to see who could fit the most beans on their fork. He always let me win, but barely.

Each evening when mom would pick us up to go home, on my way out the back door I'd yell, "Bye Pee Paw, I love you!" He'd always say, "I love you too, hon." Never just, I love you too, always with the hon at the end.

As far back as I can remember on April 6th, my birthday, Pee Paw would always ask me, "Do you feel any older today?" Each time he asked, I always told him no, because I never really felt older until my 21st birthday.

However, on that particular day, Pee Paw was in the hospital and unable to talk due to the oxygen mask he was wearing. For several months, his health had progressively gotten worse due to Alzheimer's. His memory had been getting worse and worse, but on this day, he seemed to be 100% there, at least

mentally.

I went and sat with him in his hospital room and visited for as long as I could. I knew he was unable to speak, so I had the following conversation with him, which I will never forget.

As I held his hand, I asked him, "Pee Paw, do you know what day it is today?" He squeezed my hand as if to let me know he did. I said, "It's my birthday, but not just any birthday, it's my 21st birthday."

I felt him squeeze my hand again. I asked him, "Do you know what you ask me on my birthday?" Again he squeezed my hand. I said, "I know you can't talk so I'll ask it for you. Tonnie Ree (that's what he called me because my name is Tonya Marie) do you feel any older today?" As I saw his eyes fill with tears, I said, "Pee Paw, every time you've asked me that question for 20 years, I always answered no, but you know what? I can finally answer yes to that question, because I am 21 years old today and I do feel older."

As I wiped the tears from his cheeks, I knew he

was happy to hear me say yes, even though he knew that I knew this would be the last time that question would be asked by him.

When I left the hospital, I said my usual, "I love you Pee Paw." And I heard him say through his oxygen mask, "I ove ou oo, un." He was hard to understand, but I knew what he said. Those were the last words we spoke to each other.

I visit his gravesite several times a year, and especially each year on my birthday, so I can let him know if I feel any older or not. He's gone, but never forgotten. Losing someone that you care about is never easy to deal with. Sometimes sharing the memories of your loved ones can help with the heartache. It gets easier as the years go by, but never easy.

In case you're wondering if I feel any older now that I'm 32, my answer is... I feel 32. A little older, perhaps... perhaps not.

Questions or comments about Tonya's Tales? If so, e-mail Tonya at: people4news@aol.com.

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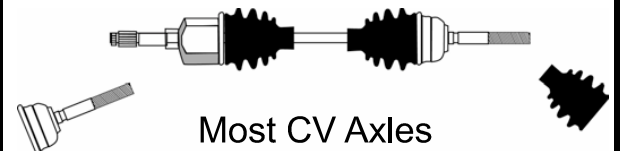
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