

FREDDIE
by Gwen Sibley

He was always my “big brother.” Even though he was shorter and smaller than me, he was almost three years older. He was my first teacher of how to live through adversity with courage and strength.

If you were to ask me what his greatest love was as a teenager and young adult, I’d have to say it was cars. He thrived on taking them apart, only to put them back together again.

When he was about sixteen, just after he received his driver’s license, he found a decaying 1939 Willys coupe in a barn in upstate New York and had it towed back to Connecticut. He wanted to restore it to its original condition, both inside and out, and spent many, many hours on this mission, completely entranced by the vision of this tarnished old gem being transformed into a shining new racing machine. However, my father thought that all these hours should have been spent in the “pursuit of education,” as he put it, and not under a car. Thus began the Father/Son war, with Freddie ultimately losing every battle, but he wouldn’t give up his car.

I watched this almost daily struggle unfold and grew even closer to my brother, becoming his loyal confidante and ally. He somehow managed to maintain his values, integrity and interests against a constant onslaught of criticism and belittling from his father.

Freddie went on to college, driving himself there every day in his Willys, and graduating with a teaching degree in Industrial Arts. By now, my father had accepted my brother for who he was and not who he wanted him to be, but it had been a long and bitter conflict.

After Freddie graduated, he decided he wanted to attend the Naval Officer Candidate School in Newport, Rhode Island. It was here that he first experienced losing his balance and slurring his words. Diagnosed with epilepsy, he had to leave the Navy before he ever had a chance to see the world. Although shaken by the abrupt end to his Naval career, he continued forward with his teaching and his cars.

A few years later, Freddie’s epilepsy grew much worse, with grand mal seizures happening regularly. After weeks of tests, x-rays, MRI’s and brain scans, the doctors told Freddie that he did not have epilepsy, but rather a huge mass in his brain that would need immediate surgery.

After the surgery, when Freddie learned that the brain mass had been cancerous, he began to live each day as if it were his last. Yet two years later, he and his wife would welcome their beautiful daughter Stacy into their lives, driving her home from the hospital in the 1939 Willys.

Freddie lived for three more years, with as much optimism, serenity and gratitude as anyone I have ever known. He was and always will be my “big brother.”

