

Widowers Support Network



THE HOPE TRILOGY

By Herb Knoll and Kihm Winship

HOPE! Where would we be without it? Hope for tomorrow. Hope for good health. Hope that our many dreams come true. The hope every parent has that their children find joy and happiness in life. Hope that a loved one recovers from a severe illness. Or perhaps the hope we have that our son or daughter will return home safely from wearing our nation's uniform in a battle-torn region of the world. Or maybe you just hope your favorite team wins the big game.

Hope gives us reason to endure, to try to overcome the most difficult of odds. Hope enables us to live the lives until our final day on this earth. Without hope, there is little sense to do otherwise.

When hope is lost, dreams quickly fade. Without hope, little can be achieved, but with hope, all goals are possible. The future has meaning and value. Tomorrow represents possibilities.

Hope is so powerful; some people believe hope can heal. Others will say hope is essential if we are to live a rewarding life. Even the terminally ill have hoped for a miracle. Hope for discovery by medical science which will provide the cure they seek. Doctors frequently comment on how it is critical for all patients to have hope for healing or recovery from a severe illness.

When people pray, aren't they hoping God will answer their prayers?

Webster's defines the word hope as "to cherish a desire with anticipation." There is a good reason the Michelle's Angels Foundation includes the word hope in its mission statement: ***"providing love, hope, compassion and comforting music to those who quietly suffer."*** Hope is one of the dimensions of all human situations, especially when facing what may appear to be impossible odds or challenges.

Many lose hope when challenged. They give up on what they can anticipate occurring. Perhaps they are just worn out from what they have endured. Maybe they have never been strong when under the pressure of a painful moment or Situation. No matter the reason, the loss of hope has contributed to too many unnecessarily lost causes, which were, in fact, winnable.

A good friend of mine once said, "No one can explain what causes a single cell to become cancerous, nor can anyone (including doctors) explain how a cancerous cell can suddenly disappear." Not knowing the unexplained alone should provide everyone with a reason to retain some level of hope.

The Widower's Support Network believes deeply that all of us need to maintain a high level of hope, regardless of the circumstances we face. There is always a good reason to have hope. But don't take our word for it. Take the words of Captain Jerry Coffee, Tony De Blois, and Tom Nate. Together, they represent the Michelle's Angels Foundation's Hope Trilogy. Three men faced what most people would describe as insurmountable challenges. Each of these remarkable men took on their difficulties with purpose and won. Each prospered in an environment all observers would find astonishing. Each had hope and shared it with others. And now, they'll share it with you.

Michelle's Angels is proud to introduce you to the ***Michelle's Angels Foundation's Hope Trilogy***. Three installments about ordinary men living extraordinary lives powered in part by their deeply rooted faith and by their never giving up hope. You will want to share these three installments with your family and friends regardless of whether they are ill or facing any challenges. Hope touches us all.

We begin with the story of Captain Jerry Coffee.

You can write any one of these extraordinary men c/o herb@WidowersSupportNetwork.com. Your comments are most welcomed and encouraged.

Herb Knoll is a widower advocate, public speaker, and workshop leader and is the founder of The Widower's Support Network (WSN), supporting America's 2.7 Million widowers and the families who love them. His breakout book, *The Widower's Journey*, is available on Amazon.com in both paperback and digital formats. To order your autographed copy, see www.WidowersSupportNetwork.com. You are encouraged to write Herb at herb@WidowersSupportNetwork.com or by contacting his office at 615.579.8136.



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THE HOPE TRILOGY

Installment #1

Captain Jerry Coffee USN (Ret)

By Herb Knoll

(The first in a series of three installments of the *Hope Trilogy*.)

A soft-spoken gentleman from Modesto, California, Jerry Coffee joined the U. S Navy in 1957 after graduating from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) with a Bachelor of Arts degree. When asked why he chose the Navy, Coffee said because he knew if he joined the Navy, he would receive training in Pensacola, Florida. Not an unpleasant place to be. Besides, had he not enlisted in the Navy, he would have been drafted into the Army.



As a naval aviator, Coffee would distinguish himself in 1962 when, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Coffee flew his RF-8 Photo Crusader on low-level reconnaissance missions over Cuba, taking photos used by the United States U.N. Ambassador to prove the existence of Soviet missiles there. When his story was featured in the 2007 History Channel series “The Man, The Moment, and the Machine,” Coffee was asked how it felt to have accomplished such a monumental feat. He responded, “It was the greatest moment of my life to find nuclear weapons within striking distance of 90% of my country.” But it was later during Coffee’s career that the depth of this remarkable man’s heart and his desire to survive became more apparent in part by never allowing himself to lose hope. In February 1966, while flying combat missions off the deck of the USS Kitty Hawk over North Vietnam, Coffee’s RA5-C reconnaissance jet was shot down by enemy fire. He parachuted safely but would be captured and held for the next seven years as a Prisoner of War (POW) in the Communist prisons of North Vietnam. Coffee repeatedly endured the torture his captures inflicted upon him. Yet when asked if he ever lost hope, Coffee replied: “No! I always believed I would be going home. Some days were more difficult than others, but I never lost hope.”



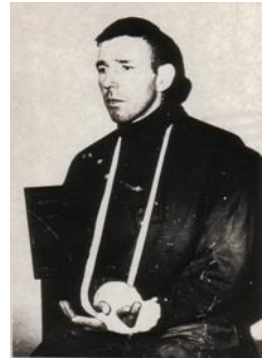
Coffee describes hope as having the ability to envision the outcome you want. “Hope and Faith are intertwined. Faith in God and faith in one another. Hope is eternal.” Those facing serious challenges, including but not limited to life-threatening illnesses, “need to be open-minded to the possibility of miracles. Hope is the last thread of substance. If you lose hope, you lose substance,” said Coffee.

“People need to maintain the desire to *live on*,” Coffee added. “If that is what hope is... then you understand the miracle of life.” And the ability to live on is the outcome hope provides. Coffee offered, “How blessed we are to enjoy God’s bounty in whatever form it may take in our lives.”

“I can never understand why people take their own lives.” “We all must have a (continual) reason to live.” “Hope gives us those reasons.” Coffee teaches us how we must maintain consciousness of the many blessings God provides.

Quoting radio-talk-show host Dennis Prager, Coffee remarked; Happiness is directly proportional to gratitude. Live your life in a state of gratitude; it makes it difficult to give up.” Coffee quickly adds, “A grateful heart is a wonderful thing.”

When asked what role his faith has in how he dealt with adversity, Coffee replied: “It allows me to face adversity without the nagging thoughts of a possible failure. It doesn’t mean I always succeeded. But even if I didn’t succeed, I was able to preserve hope for the future.” Coffee offered an example: “While in prison, I couldn’t even fantasize how good my life would be in the future.”



Coffee explained to me how the accumulation of life experiences contributes to the totality of whom we are. “We are the sum of our parts,” he offered, which happens to be a title of a speech by Hall of Fame speaker Patricia Fripp (FRIPP.com). Coffee added, “As much as we try to avoid adversity or pain... each of those experiences is as important as maturity and empathy. I attribute any success I may have enjoyed in part to the failures which preceded them,” said Coffee.

Coffee suggests how when people are face challenges, and perhaps are losing hope, they should begin keeping a log. “As a youth, my parents taught me the importance of little things such as social skills and etiquette. I kept a log of my successes, and a few of my failures.” From time to time, Coffee would review them, each with their lessons intact, each contributing to the sum of his parts.



When asked if people can learn how to endure challenges to preserve their hope for future outcomes, Coffee offered: “Absolutely. First, have faith in God.” Coffee went on to describe how the POW, who occupied his cell before him (and who at the end of the war he attempted to locate but was unable to do so) scratched on the wall of his cell three words: “God equals strength.” Coffee continues: “Hope allows you to expect the best outcomes.” Each night when he would go to his slab (bed), Coffee told himself, “Okay, Jerry, that’s one day closer to home...Whenever it may be.” Hope lived in Captain Coffee. More importantly, hope allowed Captain Coffee to live.

When speaking about some of the darker times he spent in prison, Coffee spoke of Viktor Frankl, MD Ph.D., (Wikipedia 19 Jan 2013), a noted Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist as well as a Holocaust survivor. In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (published under a different title in 1959, *From Death-Camp to Existentialism*), Frankl chronicles his experiences as a concentration camp inmate. These chronicles led him to discover the importance of finding meaning in all forms of existence, even the most sordid ones, and thus a reason to continue living. To Frankl’s point, regardless of the challenge, the pain one is enduring, the darkness of the clouds overhead, there is meaning in life. And having faith and hope nurtures our ability to seize the life which may otherwise elude us. According to Coffee, Frankl attributes his survival to the need for someone to live long enough to tell the story of what went on in the death camps at the hands of the Germans. He assigned the task to himself, hence, the reason to survive.

We enjoy the unique freedom to strive, to risk, to succeed and to sometimes fail...but to bounce back and succeed again."

– Captain Jerry Coffee USN (Ret)

Coffee drew some parallels between Frankl's experiences and his own. "When I was POW, I knew surviving my imprisonment would afford me great credibility. I knew I needed to use that credibility to help others face their challenges once I returned home."

From time to time, POWs were exposed to propaganda briefings by their North Vietnamese captors. In the end, the captives would ask, "Do you understand?" to which Coffee would reply, "I understand, but I don't agree." Such defiance was possible due to Coffee's deep religious beliefs and steadfast expectations for the future. As Coffee described the exchanges to me, I could only conclude Coffee was toying with his captors. An example of this included conversations such as on the day he asked one of his captors, "Why do you call your country the Democratic Country of Vietnam?" to which the captor replied, "Because we are one." Coffee followed with "How do you define democracy?" The soldier replied, "A democracy is where everyone agrees with the government."

"At some time or another, we all get shot down, we are all POWs – prisoners of war. Be tough. Bounce back. Don't just survive. Go beyond survival."

- Captain Jerry Coffee USN (Ret)

When asked what advice he would offer those who visit the Michelle's Angels Foundation's website or whose names are on the Michelle's Angels Foundation's Prayer List, Captain Coffee replied, "I want everyone to learn how to FORGIVE. Hatred is counterproductive. And it begins with self-forgiveness. When I first arrived at the prison, I was depressed about what my capture was doing to my family. How I lost my crewman who would never be found and how I lost my plane. I had to learn to forgive myself for all of those things, for to do otherwise was to weigh myself down with self-blame. Self-forgiveness does not mean I avoid accountability for my actions. But if one's survival depends on it, forgiving yourself for anything you may have done and for which you feel some level of guilt is a must."

"I also want everyone who turns to the Widower's Support Network for support to believe in the power of prayer. Prayer truly works. It may work in a way different from what we are asking for... but the bottom line is prayer really works... and hope enables us to live on."

Captain Coffee encourages everyone to read the poem *INVICTUS* (Latin for *unconquered*) by Ernest Henley (1849 – 1903)

INVICTUS

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

By Ernest Henley

To learn more about Captain Coffee, see: www.captaincoffee.com

Credits: AEI Speakers Bureau

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E TRILOGY

Installment #2

Tony DeBlois

by Kihm Winship

(Widower's Support Network's senior writer Kihm Winship interviewed Tony DeBlois and his mother, Janice DeBlois for this, the second in a series of three installments of the *Hope Trilogy*.)



We have seen firsthand the power of music to encourage, to comfort, to hearten, and even to heal. But perhaps nowhere is this power more dramatically expressed than in the life and music of Tony DeBlois.

A man who plays more than 20 instruments and sings in 11 languages, Tony DeBlois is something of a miracle. He began life weighing barely one pound; he spent his first 15 weeks in the hospital; at six months, his mother learned that he was blind. But Janice DeBlois never stopped believing that her son was a gift from God.

When he was just two years old, she bought him a child's Magnus Chord Organ, hoping the sounds he could make on the keyboard would encourage him to sit up. After some noisy weeks of experimentation, music began coming from her son's room – songs she had played

for him, songs he had heard on television.

At five, Tony was diagnosed with autism. One more obstacle. But Janice kept believing. She moved from Texas to Massachusetts so he could attend the Perkins School for the Blind.

As Tony grew, Janice used his skills in music to help him acquire skills for living. The motion he used in playing the violin helped him as he learned how to brush his teeth. The activity of playing the drums helped him to brush his hair. By this time, it had become clear that Tony was a savant, a young man with many challenges but an extraordinary genius for music.

Tony began playing professionally when he was nine years old, earning \$35 for a performance at the Sunshine Nursing Home. He still could not communicate verbally, but he communicated with music – touching others, encouraging, helping.

When Tony wanted to study jazz piano, he and Janice reached out to the Boston Conservatory, and people there were able to help Tony find and enroll at the Music School at Rivers (today The Rivers School Conservatory), in Weston,

Massachusetts. This led to another opportunity: When Tony's jazz ensemble won second place in the competition, Tony was awarded a summer scholarship to Boston's Berklee College of Music. Later he was admitted to Berklee as a full-time student, and in 1996 graduated with honors.

Since then, he has amazed and delighted audiences across America and Ireland, Japan, Nigeria, Singapore, Taiwan, and Vietnam. His concerts begin with the music he has chosen, and then he turns to the audience for requests, working from a repertoire of more than 8,000 songs he can play from memory.

Although a world traveler, Tony still plays faithfully at the nearby Cedar Hill Health Care Center in Randolph for holidays and special events. He also appears at as many schools as he can, with Janice by his side. His message is simple: "It's okay to be different. Believe in yourself. Always have high hopes." Tony also tells his young audiences that the two most important words are "Thank you" and advises those who would succeed, as he has done, to remember the three P's: Practice, Practice, and Practice.

Janice DeBlois' perseverance and concentration on Tony's abilities, rather than disabilities, opened up the world for him. Dr. Darold Treffert, a Wisconsin psychiatrist, has said, "In my search to understand savant syndrome better, it is from people like Tony and his mom that I've learned about matters of the heart, as well as workings of the mind."

Jack Thomas, a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, once asked Tony, "What do you think about when you sing 'Blue Skies'? Because, after all, you've never seen a blue sky."

Tony replied, "I think about sunshine."

"But you've never seen the sunshine."

"Yes, but my mom teaches me the words. We walk in the sunshine, and we sing 'Sunshine on My Shoulders,' and when I walk in the sunshine with my mom, I can feel the sunshine."

An extraordinary example of overcoming challenges and reaching out to others, Tony DeBlois is an inspiration to Michelle's Angels, and we are delighted to welcome him as our newest Angel Artist.

Learn more about Tony at www.tonydeblois.com.

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THE HOPE TRILOGY

Installment #3

Thomas Nate: *The Power of Prayer and Patient Faith*

By Kihm Winship

(Widowers Support Network senior writer Kihm Winship interviewed Tom Nate for this, the third and final installment of the *Hope Trilogy*.)



A native Texan raised in Houston, Tom Nate started life with a lung disorder, but he didn't let it slow him down. Despite childhood bouts of pneumonia, he was active in sports, graduated from college, and went on to a successful career in business. True, he might have gotten a little out of breath from time to time, but he grew accustomed to it.

But in 2002, when he was 48 years old, two things happened that would change Tom's life. First, he became the father of a son. And second, his shortness of breath became a constant challenge. By the time his son was an active three-year-old, Tom was tied to an oxygen tank and on the waiting list for a double lung transplant.

Tom talks a lot about miracles, and an early miracle in this story was that his employer's health insurance provided full coverage for transplants. The closest participating hospital was in St. Louis, and in 2007, Tom received a new set of lungs. He was in surgery for 14 hours and in a coma for six days, but he got well, and three months later, he was back home in Texas.

Through all of this, Tom wanted everything to be as normal as possible for his wife and son. His boy was now four years old and more active than ever. Tom wanted to be active with him. But eight months after he returned to Texas, his lungs failed him.

The doctors told him that finding another matching donor would be difficult; In fact, there was just a 2% chance due to antibody issues resulting from the first transplant surgery. Not sure whether he should try for another transplant, Tom and his wife prayed for 40 days. Their answers started revealing themselves as what Tom calls “a whole bunch of miracles” began happening. An offer of an airplane to take them to St. Louis. Housing opportunities in St. Louis. A school for their son, with tuition, paid anonymously by another family hearing of Tom’s struggle to live. Those were answers to Tom and Irma’s prayers, and they decided to move forward.

When Tom and his family relocated to St. Louis in October of 2008 to await another transplant, Tom’s doctor told him he had six months to live. Tom and his wife focused on prayer and on keeping his son’s life as normal as possible. Tom went to rehab every day, accompanied by his oxygen tank, to stay strong for the possible surgery.

On New Year’s Day, 2009, Tom was rushed to the hospital in an ambulance, barely able to breathe; his lung function was down to 12%. His doctor told him that he had two weeks to live, at most. Tom’s lungs had quit making oxygen and, worse, were unable to clear the CO2 from his blood. The same evening his doctor gave the terrible news, Tom went into cardiac arrest, respiratory failure, and kidney failure.

His wife Irma was called to the hospital and told Tom would not make it through the night, and she should just “let him go and not resuscitate him.” His wife refused and told the doctors that “it was not their decision whether Tom lived or died but God’s decision.” But the doctors said they could not put him on a ventilator unless they had his written permission. His wife, doing her best to stay in control, screamed at Tom to wake up. His eyes opened, and she asked him if he wanted to live or “let go.” Gasping for air and unable to speak, Tom reached up and squeezed his wife’s arm; a tear fell from his left eye. The doctors accepted that as a “Yes.” They put a tracheotomy in his throat and attached a ventilator to him. He would be unable to speak until new donor lungs were located and another transplant surgery was performed.

For the next three weeks, Tom was unconscious in the Intensive Care Unit. Four more times, the doctors tried to convince Tom’s wife to let him go. But she said, “If God wants him, God will take him.” Unconscious, Tom fought through cardiac arrest, kidney failure, a staph infection, and reactions to drugs. Tom remembers asking God to “take him home” and having out-of-body experiences: leaving his body and his hospital room behind, rising into brilliant colors, beautiful music, but hearing a voice that said, “It’s not your time yet; you have a son to raise.”

When Tom woke up, he had “tubes everywhere.” Unable to move, he told himself that he would start over at square one. The first thing he did was get a pen and paper and write down his recollections of the out of body experiences, sobbing as he wrote. Tom had total belief that God intervened and spared his life, answering all the thousands of prayers offered by so many on Tom’s behalf. He had to relearn to walk. Still tied to the ventilator, he needed an electric larynx to speak. Doctors predicted his kidneys would never work again and counseled his wife on the reality of Tom living on dialysis. But 20 days after he woke from his three-week sleep, Tom’s kidneys started working again. His body, swollen to twice its normal size from all the fluid in him, began to return slowly to normal. He had to work with physical therapists each day not only to walk but to learn to eat and bathe and dress. One day, he walked five feet. The next day, ten feet. It was grueling at times, but after three months, he walked out of the ICU.

With a portable ventilator and a scooter, Tom was able to leave the hospital and return to his family’s apartment. His job was to stay alive until a transplant could be arranged. He learned to do for himself what the nurses had been doing for him. When he asked his doctors how long he could go on, they replied, “We don’t know. Nobody’s ever done this” (having lived on a ventilator outside the hospital while waiting for a double lung transplant).

Tom and his wife again focused on their son, prayed, kept up with distant friends on Facebook, and he drew strength from his wife, who was a “rock.” Tom’s Caring Bridge website amassed over 1000 followers praying for him and his family each day. One very good friend, named Jon, was the ultimate prayer warrior, staying by Tom’s side praying the entire time Tom was in ICU. When Tom first opened his eyes after his three-week sleep, Jon was praying beside his bed.

There were many tough days, but all days were good as Tom was able to stay alive. Tom and his family waited 18 months for a telephone call that a donor had been found. At one a.m., on September 19, 2010, the hospital called to say they had a perfect match, but it was from a “high risk” donor, a 21-year-old who had traded sex for drugs; Tom could reject those lungs if he wanted to wait for another donor. Tom and Irma got on their knees and prayed for God to send a sign

that this was the right donor. After praying, his wife called a retired doctor friend of theirs back in Texas for some guidance, and she told him that Tom was hearing from God to “move forward,” but Irma felt very nervous about the high-risk lungs from the donor. Tom had said to her that the entire journey had been “high risk,” and their doctor friend in Texas also said, “Irma, all of this is high risk.” That was Irma’s confirmation. Tom tells about the difference between the first and second transplant surgeries: Before his first surgery, Tom had sought to control all of the variables. This time, he said, it was “trust God. He is in control!” The surgery was a go!

Because it would take too long to shift ventilators and load Tom into the family car, he took his scooter down the elevator, out onto the street, and drove four blocks to the hospital with his son on his lap at three a.m., and into the waiting bed. The nurses had never seen that before. Then he was taken into surgery at three a.m. on September 20th.

Tom awoke as they were wheeling him back into his room 6 hours later. Four hours after the surgery, he sat up. When his wife came in, he smiled and waved as she walked down the hall. He sat up when asked to by the nurse and several hours later stood up and walked also. Within three days, he was walking laps around the ICU. After one week, he was up to six laps and noticed that the nurse accompanying him was beginning to sweat. After two weeks, he left the hospital. It had been a journey of more than two years, during which Tom never gave up hope and faith that God had a plan for him.

Today, Tom is 58 years old and coaches his son’s football, basketball and baseball teams. On the day I spoke to him, he had pitched an hour of batting practice. “I have no bad days,” he said. “It’s all part of the journey.”

In thinking about the support he and his family received, Tom recalled a practice that his wife started while in St. Louis. Every time he or a member of their family witnessed a miracle, Tom’s wife Irma would place a pink post-it note on the mirror in the dining room, as a reminder of all the blessings they were receiving while on this journey. One day Irma counted them and found there were 140 notes on the dining room wall mirror!

Tom has spoken to hundreds of people about the power of hope, the power of prayer, the miracle of the body that God created. When he visits the hospital in St. Louis for an annual checkup, he spends two days on tests and the rest of his visit talking to patients and rehabilitation specialists, offering encouragement. “I promised God I would do all that I could for others that are suffering from terrible lung disease,” he said.

Tom gives all credit to God, family, friends, and faith for his survival. “With God, all things are possible.” Tom is always looking forward, never looking back, never losing hope; he counts himself as “supremely blessed.” And every day, he strives to be a blessing to others.

A few years later, Tom’s younger sister would also need a lung transplant. She did not survive the operation.

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