

Humor Me

By Ronald P. Culberson

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“My True Identity? I’m Connie Culberson’s Son”

In Emory, Virginia, my booming hometown of nearly 280 people, I typically introduce myself as “Ron Culberson – Connie Culberson’s son.” More accurately, I am Connie *and* Dot Culberson’s son. And I guess even more accurately, I am Connie and Dot Culberson’s best looking, smartest, most athletic and surprisingly humble son. Of course that’s just my opinion.

But when I’m recognized as Connie’s son, I enjoy a meaningful status in the Emory community. There, everyone knows my dad. He was the Executive Assistant to the President of Emory & Henry College for 34 years. He was a member of the Abingdon, Virginia Rotary Club for 53 years and served on the Board of Directors at Johnston Memorial Hospital for more than 25 years. In retirement, he was Vice President of the Abingdon Chamber of Commerce and he made regular public appearances at the Cracker Barrel restaurant usually eating breakfast for dinner. There’s nothing quite like pancakes at night.

Everywhere my dad went, he smiled, extended a hand, and said, “I’m Connie Culberson.” And since he had trouble remembering names, he even did this when greeting people he’d known for years as an ingenious ploy to get them to introduce themselves. Ironically, his friends would always say, “You don’t need to introduce yourself Connie. I’ve known you for years,” without ever disclosing their names. Nice try.

“Connie” is not a typical man’s name. In fact, it’s a nickname from his time playing amateur softball for the Army during World War II. My dad was named for the famous professional baseball player Connie Mack. And while “Connie” may sound a bit feminine, it’s far better than “Gilbert Cornelius”, his real name, which sounds more like a tasty gourmet nut.

My dad was certainly not feminine in the touchy-feely sense of the word but he definitely recognized his God-given feminism...so to speak. You see, my dad was a natural born performer. He acted in college plays and was the consummate emcee for all the local variety shows and beauty pageants. From there he matured into one of the most talented cross-dressing divas ever to appear in the regionally famous Rotary Frolics.

You see, each year as a fundraiser, the Abingdon Rotary Club put on a “talent” show – which is somewhat misleading since these particular Rotarians have no real talent. Many years ago, my dad became the Rotary version of Milton Berle and delivered an

annual Tony-quality performance as any number of famous women like Tina Turner, Dolly Parton and Pee Wee Herman. OK, so Pee Wee Herman is not a woman – he could be. The performances always brought down the house and strangely my dad was often complimented for his shapely legs.

Once, I too dressed as a woman for a staff recognition event where I worked. Apparently, there is a Gucci gene in the Culberson DNA. After the performance in which I wore a black sequined evening gown, blond wig and three-inch red pumps, I explained to my dad how tough it was to find the right panty hose for my outfit.

He responded, “I have the same issue.”

It was not a conversation that two grown men should have and yet it did create a strange bond between us.

As evidenced by his Rotary performances, my dad thoroughly enjoyed making fun of himself. At age 87 while attending the grand opening of a revitalized downtown in Meadowview, Virginia, my dad saw one of the major donors who was also an old acquaintance. He approached the woman, extended his hand and said, “Mrs. Levine, I am what remains of Connie Culberson.”

Even as age and illness began to take its toll on his body, my dad’s sense of humor shone through. One morning in early March, when he was very ill, the hospital nurse asked him, “What’s your name?” My dad smiled, extended his hand and said, “Perry Winkle.”

The nurse was delighted and for the rest of the day referred to me as “Perry Winkle’s son.”

On March 16, 2008, I had the privilege of being at my father’s side when he died. A million memories washed over me as I felt a part of *my* identity slip away. And while we are no longer blessed with this hard working, cross dressing, community servant, I can’t help but believe that on the day my dad died, he approached the Pearly Gates, extended his hand and said to St. Peter, “I’m Connie Culberson.”

And most certainly, St. Peter responded, “You don’t need to introduce yourself Connie. We’ve known you for years.”

Until next time, just humor me.

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Ron Culberson, MSW, CSP, CPAE is a speaker, humorist, and author of four books including Do it Well. Make it Fun. The Key to Success in Life, Death, and Almost

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