

'Cookie' was a U.P. savior in snowstorm

Last week I read about the storm that dumped 20 inches of snow in the Upper Peninsula that closed highways, and it brought back memories that made my heart pound with fear like accidentally buying fat-free sour cream.

Many years ago, my wife and I survived a harrowing trip to the western U.P. that included crossing the Mackinac Bridge that was swaying like it was being attacked by Godzilla in a Japanese movie during an earthquake. I'm no kitty-cat, but no one, not even the bravest of the brave, such as Superman or Underdog, would cross that

bridge with snow-covered roads at night as it shakes without having to change their shorts (or tights).

But we survived crossing it. Only to find all the roads were closed just over the bridge in St. Ignace. And all the motels were full. With nowhere to go. And we had a baby.

As humans we are faced with challenges in life that sometimes require us to maintain composure. When the chips are down, we have to do whatever is necessary to survive, even if it means resorting to eating discarded Cheerios and used gum found between car seat cushions.

It was January in the 1980s, long before cell phones and apparently weather reports. We were on our way back to Marquette when the storm's peak hit around Gaylord. The snow was so deep on I-75 that the front end of the car was busting up drifts. The car's engine was coughing due to vapor lock. I hadn't been that scared since the one time I went on a Ferris wheel.

We finally made it to the bridge, which remarkably was still open. But they closed it right after we crossed. And all the roads leading out of St. Ignace were closed. And all hotels were full. I told one of hotel clerks that we had a baby with us. She said the only thing she could suggest was for us to go to the nearby Catholic church.

And that's when my heart began pounding out of fear. I must admit when I was in my 20s I wasn't exactly keeping the faith every Sunday, if you catch my drift. I imagined going there and being confronted by the priest or — more frightening than that — a nun who would wonder about the last time I went to church.

I considered the alternative — sleeping in the car — but we couldn't do that without essentials such as blankets or a teddy bear.

When I walked into the church, it looked like a refugee camp. It was as if all the travelers on I-75 met there. People were sleeping on pews or playing cards or just sitting there praying. I imagined those were the ones who already went to confession and I was next.

But the man in charge wasn't a priest. He was an older gentleman named Cookie who was working on a giant batch of chili. He heard about the road closures and stranded motorists, so he opened up the church.

He told me to find a spot and relax, but when I told him I had a baby with us, he took us across the street to his own house where his wife set up beds for us to stay. By 11:30, we were all in warm beds watching Johnny Carson. I'll never forget that generosity.

The next morning I shoveled the driveway and we enjoyed a hot breakfast. It was sunny and the roads were open, and I thought maybe we could use some grandparents and we could just stay.

But I knew we had to go. We had other responsibilities, so we couldn't just move in and start a new life with those nice people. Besides Cookie and his wife went to church every Sunday.

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SHARE your STORY

The One Book One Community of Monroe County committee invites everyone to join in a month-long series of programs, movies, story-sharing and book discussion. The kickoff program at Monroe County Community College is set for March 18.

The series is based on the novel "One Amazing Thing" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In the book, a random group of strangers is trapped in a basement office after an earthquake. In an attempt to stay calm and to pass the time, one person suggests they each tell "one amazing thing" about his or her life.

Monroe County readers are invited to share their own stories. The One Book One Community program will distribute those stories, along with The Monroe Evening News and Monroe Public Access Cable Television.

Anyone may write a 200- to 500-word essay or record a story in a one- to three-minute video. Written

works will be published in The Evening News — such as the ones on this page — and on www.monroenews.com; the videos may be shown at program events and on Channel 21 (Comcast) and 95 (Charter).

Send written pieces to Share Your Story, Monroe Evening News, P.O. Box 1176, Monroe, MI 48161 or e-mail them to saul@monroenews.com. You also may go to www.monroenews.com and submit stories online by clicking on the blue button titled One Amazing Thing on the right side of the screen.

If you prefer to record your story verbally, call 243-5707 to make an appointment at the MPACT studios, 20 W. Fifth St. (at S. Monroe and W. Fifth Sts. in downtown Monroe).

It's also possible to choose to tell your story through a physical object. Visit the Monroe County Historical Museum from 1 to 4 p.m. April 5 to drop it off and see all of the items on display the following week.



PASSPORT TO PARADISE

BY SUZANNE GENE COURTNEY

Recently, I came across my oldest son's passport. It contained only one stamp: Indonesia. Danny always wanted to surf Bali. He did ... one year before his death.

Born in Hawaii, he loved the sea and all of nature. The islands claimed him 25 years later in a fall from a mountain ledge in the Valley of the Kings, his favorite place.



Ms. Courtney is a teacher, poet and author and lives in Monroe.

I unzipped his body bag and smoothed a lock of hair from his forehead. I placed my right hand over his heart and his left hand on mine. All those years of making him well, fixing his broken bones, straightening his teeth and now ... I could do nothing but breathe in short, ragged breaths. "God, give me the strength to

bear this," I mouthed. I felt a strange warmth. I knew my Danny was beside me.

At his funeral by the sea, the people felt his presence. During the Hawaiian chants, the canoeists raising their paddles in salute, the blowing of the conch shell and the placing of the lei petals on the gentle waves while the green sea turtles watched, a great love encircled us.

The same sea captain who took Danny deep-sea fishing as a boy steered the boat to my son's favorite surfing beach as a green sea turtle appeared, seeming to guide. Taking a handful of his ashes, we each jumped into the ocean, completing the circle of life.



Strange but wonderful "coincidences" kept happening, especially during that first year of his passing: cleverly placed rainbows, sightings, strategic words to a song, dreams of actual visitations, help in crisis, specific animals appearing and especially the four messages that came through a channeler friend to ease our pain and to help us understand.

One of the messages said that Danny could help us more from where he is than he could have from his physical self. So many people who loved Danny have attested to this. I believe that my son went ahead to help us grow, trust and believe. We were given these gifts of insight to help us develop into the wonderful people we are capable of being and to help others who grieve.

Years have passed, and the connections are more finely tuned. This is the way it is supposed to be. My son's passing has changed me forever. Our family and friends all strive to become better, more tolerant, more insightful and loving people. I miss him terribly, but I know he is near, safe, happy, constantly learning and helping me and others, especially children.

I am currently writing the third book in the trilogy about Danny. His passing over was the saddest, most gut-wrenching, amazingly profound event of my life. And yet I survive, having found peace and happiness. He continues to teach me how to live. I have always feared death. Now, I do not ... for I have seen through the veil. I feel the love.

DIVINE INTERVENTION

BY JOYCE COLLINS

In June, 1969, my husband and I packed up our car, rented a pop-up camper to tow behind and set off with our three children for a road trip west to Colorado. We had no prior camping experience, but we were young and fearless and thought it would be a great adventure for our 8-year-old son and 10- and 6-year-old daughters.

The trip started out well and we were fortunate to find camper accommodations at each juncture of the trip with the aid of a campsite guide we bought during our preparations.

By the time we reached our destination, we began to realize that a trip of this length was probably not a good idea for our first time out. We never knew it would be so cold in the mountains of Colorado in June. So after just one day in the mountains, we headed back east.

When we reached Nebraska, we decided to visit a campsite that was some distance from our route east. But it sounded so good we thought it would be



worth the miles out of our way for a visit.

It was after arriving that we found out what the "proposed" symbol in the campsite guide stood for. There was nothing there but a small lake, no electric hookup, no washroom facilities and no people for miles around. We were so tired and now so far from the highway that we decided to stay for the night and set off the next morning.

We popped up the camper, made up the beds and settled in for sleep. During the night, someone violently shaking my shoulder awakened me. I sat up ready to berate whoever was so inconsiderate to wake me in such a rough manner. But to my surprise everyone was sleeping. There was a strange smell in the camper, and I had an

overwhelming feeling of dread that I couldn't explain.

Stepping outside, I realized that the smell was not coming from outside but was contained in the camper. Waking my husband, we began to investigate and found that the gas jet on the small stove in the camper was on and the camper was filled with gas from the propane tank. We got everyone out without incident.

We could all have died that night but for the hand that shook me awake. The incident has stayed with me all these years and made me thankful for my life and that of my family and the grandchildren who would have never been. I truly believe it was the hand of God that saved us on the banks of that lake in Nebraska in 1969.

THE GIFT OF LOVE

BY TERRI DALTON

The call came late one evening in the spring of 2004.

"How are your kidneys?" my brother asked.

"Fine," I replied. "Do you need one?"

"Yes," he said. "Maybe quite soon."

That was the call that changed both of our lives.

My brother, Tom, was the transplant recipient who was freed from the need for dialysis. He didn't have to spend hundreds of hours each year hooked up to a dialysis machine. He was free to work full time, ride his beloved bicycle thousands of miles, spend time with his wife and

son, enjoy their family cottage on Lake Bellaire and perform numerous good deeds for family, friends and strangers.

I have often been asked if it

was a difficult decision to be a living organ donor. I always say, "No, there was no decision to be made." There was no doubt that I would do it. I was sure that was why God had given me two kidneys — one was for me and the other was for me to share.

For eight years, my kidney worked in my brother's body. Then last June he told me it had begun to fail. In July, he had a massive stroke. We had 11 days to tell him we loved him and to say farewell. Farewell to a wonderful man whom I was blessed to call my brother. Farewell until we meet again in heaven someday.

But that isn't the end of our story. Just (recently) my sister-in-law called and read me a thank-you letter she received from a young woman who was a recipient of a tissue donation from my brother. That young woman will be able to play volleyball again with her "new" ACL. The chain of donation goes on. I gave to him, and he gave to her.

Not everyone has the opportunity to be a living donor, but almost everyone can be a donor when they pass on. You can sign up online at www.giftoflifemichigan.org. Be sure to let your family know your wishes. You, too, can give the gift of love. Someone's life will be better for it.

