

Remembering Stephen

By Marie Coady

On a cold, damp, day this past spring, an inviting fire glowed in the hearth of John and Ruth Gunter's home on Brentwood Road in Woburn, MA. Its heat radiated across the room and restored chilled bones; but most of all; it filled the house with the warm glow of welcome. Yet, no matter its brilliance and intensity, it could not match the warmth of the Gunter's themselves.

The Gunter's are a family who have seen tragedy unfold before their eyes in an agonizing slow motion that would have destroyed most families, but this remarkable family took strength from it instead. The climax of that tragic time occurred on June 19, 1987 when their beloved son and brother, Stephen (Steve), died of AIDS. But in 1997 an event occurred that brought that trying time back in vivid remembrance.

John and Ruth Gunter had just returned from the New York premier of Christopher Reeve's new film made for HBO, "In the Gloaming". They had been invited for a very special reason. Like the family in the film, the Gunter's, along with sons, Wayne, and Jack, had nursed a beloved son and brother, Steven, through the waning months of AIDS.

Ruth remembers well the first moment she heard that dreaded diagnosis long distance from Seattle, Washington. She and John had paused before sitting down to dinner at their favorite restaurant to call the hospital in Seattle to check on Steve's condition. He had been seriously ill only days before, and they were anxious to hear his voice. Their reaction to his devastating announcement was restrained, because it came over the restaurant's public telephone where Ruth and John had gone to celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary.

"When I heard his voice, I knew immediately that the diagnosis was P. N."

"P. N.", means pneumocystis carini. An uncommon form of pneumonia that is frequently associated with AIDS.

"I turned to John, who stood close-by, and mouthed the words, 'John, he has AIDS!'" John was devastated and unable to say anything except to repeat over and over, "Oh, no---oh, no----oh, no!"

That was back in September of 1985. For several years before that, Stephen had been in and out of the hospital, being told each time he had a low-grade infection. The doctors assured him the medication they prescribed would clear up the infection, and each time he would improve and go back to work. So he still held out a faint hope that the doctors were right. But now that hope was gone.

Stephen Gunter's life began in Woburn. Like most other little boys, he went sledding in winter, swimming in summer, played sports, made friends and had fun. He, along with his older brother Jack and younger brother Wayne, attended Woburn Schools and graduated from Woburn High School, Stephen in 1967.

Just about that time, Stephen had gone to his parents and told them of a concern he had. He explained that he knew he was different, but he didn't know why he was different. He knew for a long time, and it bothered him. It made him very unhappy.

Well, John and Ruth Gunter did what most parents would do. They took him to a psychiatrist and became active participants in his counseling sessions. They tried hard to understand, but it was 1967 and few people understood. The only thing that really mattered was that they loved him unconditionally.

That following year, Stephen attended Salem State College, but when summer came he met a girl, named Cathy. They became inseparable and when summer was over, the two decided to move far away to Montana and attend the university there.

It wasn't long before the Gunter's received a call from Steve and Cathy announcing their plans to get married. John and Ruth were pleased. They were very fond of Cathy and delighted at the prospects of having her as a daughter-in-law. They were also relieved that Steve finally seemed happy. It appeared the help they had gotten him had made it easier for him to settle down and be comfortable with himself.

A little more than a year later, Steve and Cathy decided to return to attend the University of Massachusetts. They rented a farm in Deerfield, MA, and while Steve worked the land, Cathy busied herself canning and preserving foods. All the while, they both attended the University of Massachusetts and continued their studies. That idyllic life lasted five years.

When Steve decided it was time to buy a farm of their own, Cathy announced she didn't like farm life after all and wanted to travel and see the world. Steve was heart-broken but knew deep down that he had not resolved his own inner conflicts. He decided to go on a search for the answers to his own problems.

While in Arizona, he met Linda, who took him under her wing. She was quite wealthy and although a bit eccentric, she and Steve seemed to get along well. They came home for a visit in the fall to surprise his parents. And surprise them he did.

Ruth laughs heartily as she tells the story:

"A panel truck pulled into the driveway and Steve and Linda got out of the

cab. When they sprang open the back of the van, ten dogs spilled out. Well, we had two dogs of our own, and since one of their dogs was a Great Dane, I insisted it be kept outside. Linda felt sorry for it being left in the cold and decided to put Steve's coat on it."

"As luck would have it, the dog got loose, coat and all, and wandered downtown. Steve called police to inquire if the dog had been spotted. The policeman asked, 'Is it a big dog wearing something funny?' He then told Steve that not only had he been spotted, but that he had been tying up traffic and causing quite a commotion."

That was a story told over and over in the waning months of Steve's life, as well as many like it. It was a way of remembering the good times while the bad times mounted in the daily diminishing of Steve's health.

Stephen Gunter's long battle with AIDS had begun in 1979, at a time when very few were aware of the deadly epidemic that would attack and slowly rob its unsuspecting victims of their energy first and then----their life. Steve's journey to find himself ended in Seattle where he finally admitted to his homosexuality and became himself. He found a job as a supervisor in a foundry in Maryville, Washington, bought a house with five acres of land, acquired a dog named Ruby and a cat named Crystal. At last he was happy.

It was brother Jack who first went to Seattle in 1979 to be with Steve. He spent those years being there for Steve through those early crises, but he also managed to build a reputation for himself as a renowned artist. From Jack's selfless act in his brother's name, came a successful career and his own art gallery, "History of the World, Pt. IV, on beautiful Camano Island in Puget Sound.

It was shortly after that fateful phone call made from a public pay phone in a Vermont restaurant, and on the occasion of his parent's 40th anniversary in 1985, that the family decided it was time for Steve to come home---home to die.

"He had to leave all his possessions, his home, his dog, his life and friends of many years," Ruth explained. "He was nervous, thin, feverish and very defensive. He was grieving for what he had put behind him.

"My grief was with me constantly--all through Steve's illness. There were many times it showed markedly. John was different," she continued. "He would say that if he let himself think about Steve's dying, he wouldn't be able to function efficiently in his business. If John couldn't work, we wouldn't eat---it was that simple."

When Steve arrived home in July of 1986 with Jack, brother Wayne was there

to smooth the bumps in the road. He would oversee his medication and see that the dosage was properly kept. Wayne is a pharmacist. He has his own pharmacy in North Andover and an interest in thirteen other pharmacies in Massachusetts. It was his job to make all the tough decisions and to mediate when things got rough. Wayne was the glue that kept it all together.

That fall of 1986, Steve was well enough to till the soil around the Gunter home. He planted chrysanthemums and tulips that bloomed profusely the following Mother's Day, giving Ruth a Mother's Day gift to last a lifetime. He lived through four glorious seasons reveling in all of them, drinking them in and saying good-bye to each in its turn.

Finally, the day came when he needed to go to the hospital. His home environment could no longer provide enough oxygen for him, and he struggled for every breath.

"I was frantic. He was having such a hard time breathing. It was awful," Ruth remembers.

Wayne was left to make the final decision. Steve went to the hospital on a Friday night in June of 1987. He wanted to walk to the car on his own. So with the support of his brother Jack and his dad, he walked slowly to the car, taking time to stoop down and say good-bye to his dog, Ruby.

"He wanted to take the long route, down 128 and along Route 2," Ruth said of his parting. "He loved the look of Boston as he came over the hill in Belmont and was drinking it all in. Jack and I sat in the back seat clinging to each other. It was so hard."

The family stayed with him as long as they could, then came home to regroup. It was in that short time that Steve slipped away, on June 19, 1987.

"No matter how prepared you think you are for that final phone call, it's never enough," Ruth said recently. "We all listened quietly as the hospital told us of Steve's passing, then John fell apart when he heard Jack's wail of grief from upstairs."

Now summer comes with its hot sun warming the flowers and brightening their colors. The memory of Stephen Gunter is bittersweet in these shining days of summer. Bitter for his loss. And sweet for his memory.