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American Daughter - The Sam Huff Story

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American Daughter

The Sam Huff Story

By Leslie Ann Garrison

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Tio Doc and Tia Bel

*Will the circle be unbroken
By and by, Lord, by and by
There's a better home awaiting
In the sky, Lord, in the sky*

Traditional

Sam's uncle, "Tio Doc" (Maggie's brother, Gilbert "Doc" Williams), and his wife Izabel, or "Tia Bel", as Sam called her, shared their memories of the sunny child: "She was compassionate toward people, of course, always," said Tia Bel. "And we must remember that her personality was not finished yet. Her character was formed, but she was so young, her personality was not yet fully formed. As much as people are pushing to make sure we all know she was very mature, she was not yet an adult. That is my bias. She was exceptional for her age, and I want everyone to know my pride and joy in this exceptional teenager, but she was not finished yet. Her life was cut short, and we will always cherish her dreams, but they were dreams. I need to say that because I cannot give you much about the past, because the past was evolving, and we were lucky and happy to be part of it. We were very much a part of it, and that is what comforts us now, that is what keeps us going."

Doc, who uses a wheelchair to get around, shared some memories of Sam as a child: "Bel and I had only been married a year when Sammie was born. Mag and Bob brought her to San Diego for us to meet when she was only a few months old. She was such a doll throughout her life.

"When she was younger Sammie would run from the plane and

AMERICAN DAUGHTER – THE SAM HUFF STORY

jump in my lap for a ride to the baggage claim and out to the parking lot, smiling and happy to see us for her visit each year. She came every year from about the age of six until we moved to Tucson after retiring in 2003.

“We loved having her. We planned trips each year. We often went camping with our friends Marilee and Jan. Sammie would sleep in their pop-up tent camper and played with their dog, Rose.

“One year I was working in Seattle for a few days. Bel and Sammie came along. We stayed a few extra days and took her to Canada for a visit to Victoria and Vancouver Island. She was about 10. Her mother sent us a letter to show to the border folks in Canada, giving us permission to have Sam along. We forgot the letter in our packing and thus Sam endured a short interrogation by one of the Mounties as she sat in the back seat. He was very kind and asked her where she was from, was she enjoying the trip, etc. Then he asked her who she was traveling with, expecting her to say ‘With my aunt and uncle’. Instead she rolled her eyes, pointed toward us in the front seat and said, ‘These guys’. The Mountie couldn’t keep a straight face and let us continue on.

“It was during this trip that Bel arranged for us to have High Tea at the Empress Hotel in Victoria. It was the highlight of the trip for Sam. She was all dolled up and sat like a princess while she enjoyed the tea and afternoon treats.

“She loved California and often talked of wanting to move there when she grew up. During another of her visits we thought it would be nice to take her to Reno with us on the train. We hadn’t been through the Sierras on Amtrak, were looking forward to the

AMERICAN DAUGHTER – THE SAM HUFF STORY

scenery, and thought Sam would be excited to see the snow, as it was rare in Tucson. She slept the entire way.

“One year when she came to visit, I think she was about eight or nine years old, but it was not a good time for the visit because a friend of Doc’s was dying of cancer. He flew down to San Diego to say goodbye to her, and when he was gone we kept the normal life that we had: go to basketball, to McDonald’s, to the school, and do all those things, and Sam was okay with that. Then Doc came home, and two days later his friend died. So Doc went to the funeral, and Sam said, ‘You know, we need to do something for Doc because he is going to come home very sad’. So she said, ‘Yeah, let me think about it’. This was an eight-year-old girl saying this, and she accepted death, she understood that Doc’s friend had died. Instead of going to play, she said, ‘I know what we are going to do’. I was watching her from the window and said, ‘Well what are you going to do?’

‘We will make a shrine,’ she said, and I said, ‘A shrine?’ And she said, ‘We are going to make a shrine and make sure we honor Doc’s friend, and when he comes back and he sees that shrine, he will know that everything is over, and he will feel much better’.

So she went all around and collected all my good flowers. It was spring, and there were no more flowers in the yard, she took the scissors and took them all, and I thought, my God, my flowers. But I did not say anything, and for about two hours, she made this shrine and she was singing and then she said, ‘Tia Bel, it’s gorgeous, isn’t it?’ and she asked if I thought Doc would feel much better, and I said ‘Yes, I thought he would probably feel much better’. So the next day we went to do some fun things, and she wanted it to be over and taken care of.

AMERICAN DAUGHTER – THE SAM HUFF STORY

“She was the type to let things go,” Bel remembered. “I don’t think she ever held things like anger, and she made many happy moments for Maggie and Bob. She had many very good personality traits.”

“Most of the years Sam came to visit,” wrote Doc in an email, “her spring break from school did not coincide with Bel’s. As a result, Bel would take Sam to her school each day and have her help with the pre-school special education kids, three to five years old. A most amazing thing about Sam, even in her younger years, was her ability to transform her persona from goofy kid to professional in the blink of an eye. She would laugh and kid with Bel on the way in the car and, the moment they entered the school, she would become the epitome of composed politeness. The teachers and kids just loved her. A number of cards and letters came from Izabel’s former colleagues when they learned of Sam’s death. They were profound in their expressions of sorrow.

“I loved to be silly with her. She was the perfect kid for this. I remember being at the store and looking at all the stuff on the shelf and making up funny things to say and tease her. One of our secret jokes was “Puke in a Jar”. It was the name I had given to salad dressing with little chunks of pickles and other veggies. We shared this joke for many years when going to the store.

“One thing Maggie did with Sam that was so honorable, was even when Sam was very little, she always read for Sam,” Bel reminisced. “To the point where when she came to visit us, I had to read for her until the day she said, ‘Tia Bel, let me read for you because you have an accent,’ and the books that Mag chose for her were like Barney and the Berenstain Bears, always the stories

AMERICAN DAUGHTER – THE SAM HUFF STORY

showed kindness and nurturing, so they made very good choices to frame her mind with respect for others. It showed that she learned the lessons in the books, because when we were talking sometimes she would say ‘I read this book and they said...’ and so you could see she took it to heart. They were about values, human values. And also they taught her not to be a pushover, and that is what made her strong.

“Another thing they did for her was that every morning when she got up, Maggie was already at work, and when she came home in the afternoon, Bob was at work. They made it so every minute one of them was with her when she was very young, for a long time. And perhaps they sacrificed some things so they could do this, I don’t know, maybe with work, but they made sure she had their presence. And later when she came home from school, she had her chores and she had to go do her homework. They made a schedule for her to have one of them there. This was commendable and she was very fortunate. And also, her parents worked and they made sure she knew the value of doing her work. She did not have an idle example of life.

“They were committed to being parents,” said Doc. “It was second nature to them. It isn’t second nature to a lot of people now, but for them it was.”

“Maggie is so funny and Bob is so sweet, you know,” Bel added.

“They did not try to suppress Sam, they let her be who she was. Maggie knew that if she had tried to do that, to hold Sam back in any way, she would have had trouble, Sam would have rebelled.

Later, when Sam reached the teen years and began to do the things

AMERICAN DAUGHTER – THE SAM HUFF STORY

teens do, such as talking on the phone and laying around the house, her dad would have none of it. “He got her up and made her help him around the house, made her help him care for the family home,” Doc laughed. “She didn’t like it sometimes, but that was how it was.”

Things changed in other ways when Sam reached her teen years. Some of her friends talked about joining the military, and Sam listened.

“When Sam was sixteen, a sophomore in high school,” Bel said, “she was invited to go to one of the dances with a young man who was in the military already; he was in the Army when he was a senior. And she felt so grown-up, and so important, and she spent the entire Easter week with us, going to Macy’s, going to Nordstrom in San Francisco to buy a dress to go to the dance. She was so impressed with him because he was handsome and articulate and wore his uniform, and she loved to go visit with his sister, who had a baby. She went with his family to his boot camp graduation. So she saw all this when she was very young, and he was like a poster boy for the Army. You talk to that guy and he was so smart, and now he is a sniper in the Army. After he went to Hawaii for training, his sister told her he had a girlfriend there, and Sam broke up with him.

She was already talking about going into the Army by that time, however, and she had been very impressed with him. “It’s not like anyone would ever blame any one person for the events that led up to Sam’s going over there,” said Doc. “And it wasn’t like the family had this military history full of generals or something, either. Sam’s grandfather and his brothers fought in World War II because all the men went back then. Maggie went into the Marines

AMERICAN DAUGHTER – THE SAM HUFF STORY

right out of high school, just like Sam did, to get out of Tucson, to go do something different. Maggie didn't want to go to college right away, and look what it did, it launched her career in law enforcement, the communications and everything. Maggie was number one in her class at air traffic control school. There were probably many reasons why Sam went into the Army, and it's safe to say that young man could have been part of the inspiration."

"She was searching for her identity," Bel continued. "She told me she wanted to be a psychologist after the military, and she wanted to take classes while she was in the Army so she could do this. She also talked to her father about going into the FBI."

"She was very goal-oriented," said Doc. "She definitely had some goals in mind."

Bel laughed, remembering Sam's tendency when young, to want people to know how much she knew. "When she came back to her school from one of her visits with us, and you know I work with children that sometimes use wheelchairs, and she was about in the first grade, and the teacher one day said, 'We're going to get a student you know, who uses a wheelchair, and I need you all to make him welcome and help him in every way you can.' And Sam told me later, she was sitting in the back of the room and she raised her hand, and told the teacher, 'I know everything about when someone uses a wheelchair. My uncle uses a wheelchair and my auntie teaches children who have wheelchairs, and I help her all the time.' So she was the expert. At that age she did not yet know how to take out her braids, but she was the expert with the wheelchairs."

The one year anniversary of Sam's death was approaching when

AMERICAN DAUGHTER – THE SAM HUFF STORY

Tio Doc and Tia Bel spoke of their niece. “The calendar is not a natural thing, it’s a man-made thing, to count, you know,” said Bel. “and when you see that one year has passed, you figure out that she is really gone.”

This is because nobody from such a close and loving family would stay gone for an entire year and not get in touch with those left behind. Perhaps the reality of the departed one not returning is brought home irrevocably by the full cycle of the seasons. For family members and other loved ones, the sudden death of a child causes such a shock of sorrow that it can seem at first that every moment is years long, every day a millennium. When the one-year mark is reached, the mourner may look back and wonder how the days went past, when at the beginning, they could not imagine how to make it through the next hour. The one-year mark is a watershed moment for many people, to realize that they were somehow able to survive such emotional devastation. Families are made up of circles – those circles include parents and their children, brothers and sisters who are also grandchildren to the grandparents. The family, whatever form it takes, is a sacred, honored, and respected part of American society.

The circle extends through space and time, as parents grow old and become grandparents, as children grow up to become young parents, as babies appear and grow into children – the circle remains unbroken, until it spirals over time, through generations, receiving and including new members as they are born, losing members as the elderly pass away. When the circle is so abruptly broken, as with the death of an only child, all who know the family grieve with them the breaking of that line.

Tio Doc, who is a singer and musician, shared his sadness about

AMERICAN DAUGHTER – THE SAM HUFF STORY

the afterlife, and what he imagined might be true for Sam. He told of watching a popular television show, in which the main characters were trying to remember the words to a traditional folk song.

“In learning a new song recently, I had a memory of it from years ago, and we were watching a sitcom the other night and one of the stars, the late John Ritter, died and they’ve dealt with his death on the show in a variety of ways over time, and one of them was a trip that the family used to take annually to this cabin in the woods, and there was some conflict between the two daughters and the mother, but the two daughters decided to go out of town and blow everything off.

“They stopped in a little café, and there was Mac Davis, you know, the country singer. They had remembered that when they made this excursion with their father, they had joined him in singing a song, and they were trying to remember the words. They couldn’t remember all the words, so this guy in this little café, Mac Davis, suddenly starts singing that song, and it was ‘Wayfaring Stranger’.

“I looked it up on the Internet, and it’s an old traditional, almost a religious hymnal sort of thing, and I’ve been learning it. It seems to have hundreds of verses, about this guy who has died and he’s going to heaven, and it says he’s going to meet his father, and he’s going to meet his mother, and he’s going to meet them when he comes.”

Tio Doc paused, his eyes filling with tears.

“And I just wonder, about Sam you know. It’s the out-of-synchness of a child dying first. She doesn’t have those people there to meet

AMERICAN DAUGHTER – THE SAM HUFF STORY

her. She won't know anyone," he continued, his voice breaking momentarily. "So it was just something that reminded me, and I was thinking about how screwed up it is, that it happened so out of synch."

Later, he added, "I have a theory about why she was taken when she was, and this is just my own idea, it doesn't have to be anyone else's. I think God took her before she had to kill someone. I can't think of any other reason, and that works for me."

Bob and Maggie raised Sam in a home where no particular religious preference was emphasized. Bel, who is a former nun, said that in her late teens, Sam had begun asking her questions about spirituality, about religion and life and death, and Bel had remained objective and noncommittal in her replies. She did not want to seem as though she were telling Sam what to believe. She said their conversations had been brief and the subject had not come up often.

"When they sent her personal belongings home, Maggie and Bob found among the other items this," said Bel, pointing to a statue of the Virgin Mary that stands in a corner of their living room. On the hands of the statue is draped a rosary. "They said it was in her pocket when she died, and nobody had known she had it, and nobody knew where she got it."

Later, her team leader in Iraq, Sergeant Sam James, would acknowledge the presence of the rosary in Sam's possession. "She kept it looped around her belt, and in her pocket," he confirmed. "She carried it all the time."

AMERICAN DAUGHTER – THE SAM HUFF STORY

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