

Remembering Susan: A blond tomboy who died way too young

By Jeri Rowe

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Jan. 7, 2007

It all comes down

To the ones you love

— **Tara Nevins**, fiddler and singer for Donna The Buffalo

Susan Burbage, my blond-haired classmate from first grade, had a page-boy haircut, front teeth as big as Chiclets and a smile so big her eyes wrinkled shut. And over the years, I saw that smile often along the salt marshes of Charleston, S.C.

After Mrs. Turner's first-grade class at Orange Grove Elementary, Susan and I always hung close. We rode bikes, played dodge ball, sang, endured geeky outfits, shared classes and friends until we graduated from Middleton High as part of what some called the "Class of Eighty-Fun."

But like so many, we lost touch after turning our tassel. She went to Clemson University; me, the University of South Carolina.

Yet, every time we talked — whether at a high school reunion, a wedding or more recently over our shared passion for Donna The Buffalo — the years melted

away because we had experienced together those classic passages from any young life.

You see, we were characters in each other's life story, molded by the same salt-scented geography. Just two kids from the middle-class South who yearned for a clear morning, a slalom water ski, a fast boat and a crooked finger of water that shimmered like blown glass.

Susan Burbage Tomassetti, water skier, bike rider, singer, dodge ball player. She now becomes the first to leave our close-knit crew from tiny Middleton High. She died of colon cancer five days after Christmas. She was only 43.

So it begins.

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Two Saturdays ago, I slipped into my one dark suit and drove 320 miles from Greensboro to downtown Charleston.

I scooted into the back pew of the Church of the Holy Communion — the very place where Susan, a former acolyte, was baptized, confirmed and married — because I knew I had to say goodbye.

She was in the full bloom of her life, a physical therapist and big-hearted volunteer the priest so eloquently described as “slender as a rail, stronger than a nail.”

Yet, she was ripped away from us by a six-letter word we've all learned to hate.

She left a mother, father, two younger brothers, an ocean of friends and a husband, Jeff Tomassetti, a man she always told me was her soulmate.

“Jeff told me, ‘Part of me has gone away with her, but part of her is with me today,’” Father Daniel Clarke told us. “God be praised for such a gift.”

Inside the church, I saw at least dozen faces, all familiar as family. All members of the “Class of Eighty-Fun,” graduates of a school that no longer exists.

They came from Atlanta, Morristown, N.J., and the many far-flung corners of Charleston.

We all wanted to sit in the 158-year-old church, a few blocks from the Cooper River, to remember a blond-haired tomboy who made us laugh.

It reminded me of “The Big Chill,” the 1983 film in which college buddies fly in to attend a funeral of a good friend. That friend was played by Kevin Costner, whom you never saw.

Well, as I sat in front of the stained-glass, two-story Jesus, I realized Susan was our Kevin Costner.

She had brought us all home.

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The last time I had heard from Susan was September 2005 after Donna The Buffalo’s show at Greensboro’s Carolina Theatre. She read my Go Triad cover story about the group and shot me a four-paragraph e-mail, all bright and scattered with exclamation marks.

After enjoying a jam band festival in Tennessee and mountain biking in Brevard, she and Jeff swung through Greensboro to catch yet another Donna show before heading home to Fernandina Beach, Fla., a small, historic town just north of Jacksonville.

“Maybe, I’ll see you sometime soon at a high school reunion or a Donna show!!!” she wrote in her e-mail.

Two months later — after getting a clean bill of health two and half years earlier — she found out she had colon cancer.

We’ve all seen a lot of grief recently with the death of former president Gerald Ford, soul legend James Brown and Lauren Cole, a Rockingham County teenager who, like Susan, died too young.

Yet, I remember what a retired Congregational minister from Greensboro told me after my father died in October 2000: Once the grief wanes, love always remains.

And two Saturdays ago, as I stood beer in hand, in a condominium overlooking Folly Beach, I thought constantly about what he said.

There I was, surrounded by those familiar faces from Susan’s memorial service, people I’ll know for the rest of my life.

We laughed, joked and sang off-key. We journeyed to a dive bar near the beach to sing bad karaoke at midnight as we wore strings of plastic beads to celebrate the birthday of an Internet-ordained preacher we didn’t even know.

Only in Charleston.

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After Susan's death, I looked back at my Donna the Buffalo story to see what caught her eye. That's when I saw this quote from Jeb Puryear, the group's guitarist.

From a crackly cell phone somewhere in New York, he rattled on about community being so rare these days, yet being the positive thing that draws fans to their shows, like a magnet to steel.

"If you knock it down to a one-word description," he told me, "it's really about the essence of love, I suppose."

Six days after Susan died, her brother Mark and his wife, Elizabeth, had a baby girl: 8 pounds, 15 ounces. They gave her the middle name Susan. That seemed so appropriate, so fitting, so right.

Love endures. Memories remain. All thanks to my old first-grade classmate.

So, it begins.