

December 23, 2005

GIVING BACK**The Game of a Lifetime**

**How One Daughter's Present
Set Off a Round of Generosity;
Mission: A Round at Augusta**

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 December 23, 2005; Page W1

Like almost anybody who has picked up a golf club, my stepfather has always had a fantasy: To play at the Augusta National Golf Club. The legendary Georgia course is home to the Masters Tournament, and admission is strictly limited to its closely guarded roster of members and their invited guests. Neither I nor my stepfather knew a soul there.

So when I said I wanted to surprise him with a round of golf there, everyone I talked to said it would be impossible. Why would an absolute stranger invite a 70-year-old suburban Detroit real-estate developer to Georgia to tee off at one of the world's most secretive and exclusive clubs?

In a season of giving, this is a story of acts of generosity, each one a little more surprising and heartfelt than the one before. It starts with my attempt to thank my stepfather, Robert Rosin, for the lifelong, selfless gift he had given to me and my family. Bob married my mother, Suzanne, more than 30 years ago, when I was 2 years old, and my sister, Lizzie, was 4. Though he already had three children, Bob treated us as his own.



The clubhouse at Augusta National.

As Bob's 70th birthday approached early last year, our family had little to celebrate. Nearly a year earlier, my mom was diagnosed with lung cancer. At the time, she was 58, a nonsmoker and longtime Pilates instructor. Some doctors were reluctant even to treat her advanced cancer, but Bob stood by her and us through two surgeries, three courses of chemotherapy, two rounds of radiation and a coma that lasted nearly two months. When doctors told us to make funeral arrangements, Bob refused to give up. He fought with doctors who told us that there was no hope, and led our formerly secular family in prayer. When my mom came out of the coma, he saw her through an exhausting rehabilitation, and as she relearned how to swallow, walk and talk.

Mom had just made it home when we began to discuss Bob's birthday. Bob has long been a passionate golfer, and a good one at that. We thought about setting up lessons, or bringing in a pro to play 18 with him. And then my mom spoke up: "He's always dreamed of playing golf at Augusta National."


This would be no simple dream to realize. Augusta National is shrouded in institutional silence. It has been at the center of controversy over recent years because it has admitted no women and few black members. The club comments publicly only through an official spokesman, and only about the Masters; it refuses to disclose its members' names or even how many there are. Published accounts place the membership at about 300.

Founded in 1932 in eastern Georgia, Augusta National was conceived as a winter club for Northern industrial leaders and friends of co-founder Robert T. "Bobby" Jones Jr., the era's premier golfer. According to people familiar with the club's history, a small percentage of the membership would be drawn from the Augusta and Atlanta area. The club's founders started an annual, invitational tournament that became the Masters, the sport's elite event. While professional golf's other three major tournaments -- the U.S. Open, British Open and PGA Championship -- are played at different courses every year, the Masters is always played at Augusta National. Every significant player since 1934 has walked its fairways.

By the time my mother returned home after her coma, I had grown particularly tired of being told about impossibilities. Maybe I couldn't cure cancer. But maybe I could arrange for the golf outing of a lifetime.

I had one faint hope: In the age of the Internet, perhaps even Augusta National couldn't keep all its secrets. I did an online search, and discovered one newspaper had published what it said was the club's list of members. I couldn't be sure it was accurate, but it included names like Jack Welch, Warren Buffett and former defense secretary Melvin R. Laird. (Representatives of Messrs. Welch, Buffett and Laird confirm they are members.) I then found the home addresses for some 40 members living in Georgia.

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I decided to write to them. I explained my mom's illness, my stepdad's role in our family and our desire to surprise him with a memorable round of golf. I said I lived in New York and worked as a journalist. (At the time, in early 2004, I was a freelance reporter and not employed by The Wall Street Journal.) My husband said he thought the letter was too long -- over one typewritten page -- and pulled too hard at heartstrings. "Heartstrings are my only hope," I remember telling him.

I employed one arguably wily tactic: I enclosed two family photos with each letter and, on the outside of the envelope wrote, "PHOTOS -- DO NOT BEND." I reasoned that my appeal might resonate with some member's wife -- and that a good way to attract a wife's attention would be send her husband a letter, with pictures inside, addressed in a woman's hand.

The first response came swiftly. Boone Knox, a retired banker from Georgia, called within a week. He and his son were planning to play soon, and Bob could join them if he could get to Augusta in two days. My mom had a medical test scheduled, and we knew we couldn't make the arrangements in time. In thanks, my sister and I sent Mr. Knox flowers.

But then my mailbox began filling up with polite regrets. "I appreciate your letter," wrote Carl E. Sanders, who was Georgia's governor from 1963 through 1967. Now 80, Mr. Sanders wrote that he couldn't play golf due to an injured back. "I wish you and all your loved ones the best," he wrote. Another member wrote: "As you may imagine, requests for a round of golf from friends, clients, friends of friends, old school mates, relatives, etc. use the time I can devote to golf entertainment. I am sorry." When I called recently to ask him about the letter, he declined to be identified. "I wouldn't want to encourage anyone else to try your trick," he said.

About a month passed. Bob's birthday celebration was in less than a week. My sister and I were crestfallen at the thought of heading to the gathering in Tucson, Ariz., where my mother was recuperating, without a gift. My mom told me to compile a scrapbook with the letter and pictures I had mailed, plus the responses I had received. "Just showing him what you tried to do for him will be present enough," she said.

Reasons to Say No

I was putting letters into an album one evening when the phone rang. In a thick southern accent, the caller identified himself. "This is Dessey Kuhlke from Augusta, Georgia," he said. He told me he had read my letter over and over again since it arrived the previous month. Each time, he told me, he thought of another reason why he should say no. "But none of the reasons seem good enough," he said.

It was as if someone had given me a gift.

Mr. Kuhlke express-mailed a formal letter of invitation for a round of golf at Augusta National for Bob and two others of Bob's choice. He included a photocopy of a photograph showing the club's chairman, William "Hootie" Johnson, handing the Masters Trophy to Phil Mickelson, who had just won the 2004 tournament. Standing behind Mr. Johnson was a group of members wearing the famous Augusta National green jackets. With a black marker, Mr. Kuhlke had drawn an arrow toward one man's face and wrote "ME."

That weekend, we handed Bob the photo album. He stared at the book for about 20 minutes, muttering again and again: "Say, 'Honest to God.' Say, 'Swear to God.'" For two weeks, he carried that book with him everywhere.

Mr. Kuhlke was born in Augusta, like his father and his grandfather. He joined the Army after high school and then graduated with a business degree from Georgia Southern University in 1963. He joined his family's construction business, retired in the mid-1980s when he and his brothers sold it, and has focused since on private investing. He and his wife, Barbara, had three children: David in 1968, Cathy in 1972 and Brian in 1975. Mr. Kuhlke was invited to join Augusta National in 1993. When he was at the top of this game, he was not a bad golfer. His best round was in 2000 when he shot a two-above-par 74. "It was an aberration," says Mr. Kuhlke, now 64 years old.

Mr. Kuhlke and I discussed sending Bob to Georgia in December 2004. But as the date approached, my mom grew terribly ill. In September, I asked Bob what he thought of flying in a few months to Augusta. He winced. I told Mr. Kuhlke that my stepfather had chosen to stay with my mother. He assured me his offer wouldn't expire.

I met Mr. Kuhlke in person a few months later, when he and his wife traveled to New York City and my husband and I met them for dinner. Over the next several months, I'd email him copies of my articles. He'd call to ask about my mom. Our conversations weren't light: He asked me a few times if I, as a Jew, believed in an afterlife, and he shared his Christian views with me. I felt that he took a pleasure in comforting others. When you're sad a lot -- and when your parent is dying slowly you're sad a lot -- you sometimes worry that your sadness makes other people uncomfortable. With him, I felt the opposite. He helped me confront the inevitability of my mom's illness. Even though I was nearly half his age and from a different walk of life. Even though I was a virtual stranger.

My mom died in June. After her funeral, I sent Mr. Kuhlke an email to let him know. After some time passed, he called and said, "Let's get this trip planned."

Earlier this month, on Dec. 5, my stepfather flew into Columbia, S.C., a 70-minute drive away from the course. Mr. Kuhlke was waiting to pick him up in his gray GMC Envoy SUV. The two of them, meeting for the first time, talked all the way to Augusta.

As far as my stepdad knew, he would be staying at the Radisson hotel in town. On the way downtown, Mr. Kuhlke told Bob that he needed to take care of something at the club before dropping Bob at the hotel. They walked through the club's main house and onto the grounds, which has 10 cabins that serve as accommodations for members and their guests. Mr. Kuhlke led Bob to the Jones cabin, a bungalow near the 10th tee named after the club's co-founder. Mr. Kuhlke showed him the living room, dining room and two bedrooms.

"Do you ever stay here?" Bob asked.

"I'm staying here right now," he told my stepdad. "And so are you."

"I was dumbstruck," Bob said later.

Augusta National permits guests to take photos and to share their stories with others. The details of their time in Augusta come from interviews with my stepdad and the two partners he invited along -- his close friend Don Kwasman of Tucson, and my husband, Joe Ehrlich.

When I first discussed with him my desire to publish a story about this experience, Mr. Kuhlke was wary. Not only is he a private person, but he didn't want to subject the club to attention that might upset the members. But he agreed that he would cooperate, in part because he believed such a story would be comforting to those who had overcome loss, not least its author.

'Death Letters'

He later told me my letter was hardly the first of its kind. Mr. Kuhlke says that in his 12 years as an Augusta National member, he has received other "death letters," as he calls them -- "more than I could put a number to." About 10 years ago, he heard from a man who said he had six months to live. Mr. Kuhlke obliged him his dying wish and took him golfing at Augusta. Three years later, the man called again asking if Mr. Kuhlke would host his boss. Mr. Kuhlke gives the benefit of the doubt. "Maybe the course cured him," he says.



Robert Rosin (left), Don Kwasman, Dessey Kuhlke and Joe Ehrlich at August National.

Don and Joe arrived a few hours after Bob, and in the evening the four convened in the Jones cabin. At a table set up in the living room, a staffer served them fried chicken, collard greens, corn on the cob and apple-bread pudding. After the meal, the men adjourned to the living room. Sitting beneath a portrait of Bobby Jones that had been painted by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, they drank Grey Goose vodka and Famous Grouse scotch until 1 a.m.

Before his first hole the next morning, Bob took in the scenery. In front of him was a perfectly groomed fairway. To his right was the sprawling white clubhouse -- originally an antebellum plantation -- with its two-story porches and blooming pansies. To the left was the 18th green, where earlier this year Tiger Woods sunk a 15-foot birdie putt in sudden-death play to win his fourth Masters.

Bob drew back his club and uncorked about a 215-yard drive, landing his ball at the top of a hill on the fairway. "I hit it straight down the middle," he says. "I felt good." Over the next two days, Bob, Joe and

Don played 36 holes, plus a round on the course's nine-hole, par 3 course.

If for a moment the foursome forgot the course's history, there were reminders. On the 13th hole, my husband, Joe, landed his ball in a swale between a semi-circle of sand traps and the green. Joe expected to reach the green with a pitching wedge. His caddy -- all golfers at Augusta National are assigned one -- advised him to wedge himself out with a putter. "Really? A putter?" Joe asked. The caddy responded: "When Jack Nicklaus had his ball in the exact same place, he used a putter. But you do what you think is best." Joe did as told, and missed the cup by about 15 feet.

Put Into Words

As for why Mr. Kuhlke offered to take my stepfather golfing, he explained only later. Sometimes, particularly in a moment of grief, a stranger can make the biggest difference, he said. Mr. Kuhlke's adult life has been marked by tragedy. In 2002, his eldest child, David, died at 34 after a long illness. Sixteen years earlier, his younger son, Brian, died at 10 years old after a playground accident.

Mr. Kuhlke says he was helped through, in part, by kindness from unexpected sources. When Brian died, he was contacted by a minister and writer named John Claypool who had learned of the death from a mutual family friend. Dr. Claypool, who had lost a young daughter years earlier, began calling the Kuhlkes to counsel them as they mourned. Mr. Kuhlke says it was his dream to meet Dr. Claypool in person, and did so in 2002. "He was the kind of person who put into words the kind of things you were thinking but could not express," he says. Dr. Claypool died earlier this year at age 74.

He also got a letter from another stranger, Jack Nicklaus. The golfer had won his historic sixth Masters championship on the day of Brian's death. Mr. Kuhlke was not yet a club member, but Mr. Nicklaus had learned that a local couple had experienced tragedy on the day of his triumph. "He said that he was writing as one parent to another and expressed sincere sympathy," Mr. Kuhlke says. "I think more of him because of his compassion than all of his golf victories."

The night before my stepdad was to arrive in Augusta, Mr. Kuhlke and I talked on the phone for more than an hour. I told him that in the days leading up to the trip, my sister and step-siblings and I heard the first notes of excitement and optimism in Bob's voice since my mom became ill. Hearing that, I told him, was a bigger gift than we ever could have imagined.

Mr. Kuhlke's response: "This experience has meant more to me than you."

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