

Christmas Memories

By Eric's Mom, Mary Ellen Gulbranson Parnell

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Christmas always reminds me of the great Christmas blitzes at Lexington Prison where Coach Eric and orderly Jimmy Scott, started the annual Christmas party with eight bikes as prizes. Eric's first inspiration burgeoned into Christmas give-aways that soon included all the prisoners, their children, and the staff.

The gym became a maze of bike parts with the inmates happily assembling them until the warden quashed that operation. It doesn't take much imagination to understand why. Lethal weapons were everywhere. But the Christmas Spirit invaded that gym so strongly that nothing potentially bad actually happened.

I can just hear Eric admonishing them, "Be men, don't be takers, be givers." That was one of his favorite exhortations. Eric had nearly every business in OKC involved. He turned his church's congregation, Ariel Chapel, into elves. Everyone was busy assembling age-appropriate clothes, toys and candy for the prisoners and their kids.

For Christmas is always about the Spirit of Giving, for God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son who gives us the greatest of all gifts, forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

When I think of Eric, I think of one who delighted in giving. And don't let any Scrooges tell you not to buy gifts at Christmas. Remember the Magi and the miles they traveled to put gifts at the feet of Jesus? Too much commercialization? Imagine what a commercial enterprise that Magi journey entailed.

Johna Mills, friend of Eric's has been involved with these Prison Xmas parties (I use the X deliberately). She is an Alpha Elf who also gifts many with her incredible singing voice throughout the area prisons.

This morning, Johna Mills wrote to me about the Christmas Banquet held last night at Lexington where she and her husband ministered. She said that when she sat down in the Chapel in Unit 7, right in front of her was a prayer bench with a beautiful brass plaque that read:

DEDICATED IN REMEMBRANCE OF ERIC PAUL GULBRANSON

I didn't know about this memorial and tribute to my son. A prayer bench, how appropriate I thought. And Unit 7 was never forgotten by Eric. He made sure they had their Christmas cake walks. Besides, it was home to Tommy Ward, a lovely man, The Innocent Man, as proven by novelist John Grisham.

Tommy adopted me as his Mother and never forgot me on Mother's Day.
His story is many chapters long. Maybe let John Grisham tell it.