

## ***Rodney LaRue Armstrong, Jr.***

The American Daffodil Society lost one of its true statesmen on Friday morning, August 18, when Rod Armstrong, after a long and courageous and seemingly won victory over lung cancer, succumbed after a very private battle against leukemia. He was only 73. He died peacefully after seven weeks in the hospital, surrounded by his loving family, wife Kathy, son Andrew and daughter Selena.

Rodney LaRue Armstrong, Jr. was a native of Covington, Virginia, born in the same county as his parents, LaRue and Frances Armstrong, and one county over from where his great-great-great grandfather lived. Rod spent his summers in the Allegheny Mountains near his grandfather's farm, which made a lasting imprint on his soul.

After graduating from the University of Virginia with a master's degree in chemistry, he returned to Covington where he taught math and coached football and wrestling. He then earned a M.A. at William and Mary and worked in banking in Richmond before moving to Texas in the late 1970s to work for EDS. There he met the love of his life, Kathy. After they married in 1980, Rod worked as a lobbyist in D.C. and began his final career as CEO of his own company. In 1999 he sold his company, took early retirement, and began the second half of his working life growing and showing prize-winning daffodils and taking part in every facet of the work of his beloved American Daffodil Society.

I cannot remember the ADS without Rod. I first met him and his sister Beverly with his parents at the 1973 ADS Convention in Williamsburg. And he has been there ever since. I cannot imagine how we will do without him.

Rod is the middle of a three-generation daffodil family, one might say a dynasty. His mother, Frances Armstrong, was one of the most outstanding members of the ADS, judging, exhibiting and writing columns for the Journal. She was one of my first three important mentors, and "breakfast with Frances" was always



on my check-off list of things I must do. Nor can I remember when Andrew was not a part of my special daffodil family, growing and showing daffodils and writing about them, alongside his football career. When he went to college, he took his daffodils with him.

I congratulated Rod on the night he was installed as President, and through tears he said, “It should have been my mother.” As Richard Ezell explained to his Rebecca, fairly new to daffodil history, “Before the intrepid Marie Bozievich, there was a glass ceiling in ADS politics. Women could serve right up through the 2nd vice-presidency, but were then relegated to appropriate committee chairmanships.”

“Don’t worry about that, Rod,” I reassured him. “She would have been so very proud of you and what you’ve already done, and I know you will do for the ADS things she would take pride in.” And that he has done.

He served as President of the ADS, bracketed by two lengthy terms as treasurer. He was always on alert for business discrepancies and pointed them out politely but firmly. He was the one to whom people turned for advice on all business matters.

Growing superior daffodils was not enough for Rod; he was a master showman. I always think of him when I think of the Tuggle award, which he got officially named for his parents’ neighboring friend, Harry Tuggle. He won it every time it was offered; and the one picture I let get away from me was a beautifully staged quadrangular Tuggle at the CMDS show about ten years ago.

Whenever he could come to Clinton to the CMDS show, I’d pair the slowest, most nit-picking judges we had with Rod, then stand back to watch as the usually hesitant, slow-deciding judges got a crash course in speed-judging, Rod Armstrong style.

Jaydee Ager posted the first response to the news of Rod’s death on Daffnet, which had come as a surprise to everyone, because Rod, so open about his fight against lung cancer, chose last spring to keep to himself and his family the new enemy invading his weakened body. She spoke for all of us when she wrote simply, “I am devastated by this news, and so very, very sad.”

Becky Fox Matthews remembers vividly his barely maintained patience in workshops where wrangling over seemingly picky points of judging rules and regulations got extreme. “It’s just a damned flower, for goodness sake!” he would say.

Rod was the sort of person who could move the usually inarticulate Larry Force to write, “You could always count on Rod for anything that needed to be done. Just a wonderful person altogether. I, along with all others, will truly miss seeing Rod at shows and conventions. They won’t seem the same without his being

there in person, but he will always be there in our hearts and minds.”

Phyllis Hess, for whom we are indebted for this joyous picture of Rod and Kathy celebrating his presidency, has a pair of memories about Silver Medal ceremonies. Rod, who was presenting the medals in Richmond in 2008, began reading a long list of credentials. Then he stopped, remembering all the hard work he and Phyllis had done as a team (she stayed on an extra two years as secretary to help Rod out), and said through tears “Get on up here, Phyllis!” Someone later gave her a printout of the official things he had intended to say. They were nice, but the tears meant more.

Then, in Williamsburg in 2015, she and I were privileged to be sitting at Rod’s table when the Silver Medal was presented. We knew a secret, because we could count to six. That year, he was finally off the committee that chooses the Silver and Gold Medalists and was eligible to receive this highest honor. I’d written his nominating letter nearly eleven months before, and along with Ann Hibbs and two dozen Texas Daffodil Society members, put on paper all the many things they’d said about him, but now in permanent form. Rod’s tears of joy were real; for once his math skills had left him and he’d forgotten to count.

Ann Hibbs tells of his motivational tactics with her. “Ann,” he said, “here’s a list of things the Regional Vice-President is supposed to do. Do them and you will be the best RVP the Southern Region has ever had.” I can witness that she was. And then he said, “I know you already know how to write. I’m counting on you to put out the best regional newsletter we have ever had,” and she’s done that, too. Rod expected the best of you, and somehow you could not let him down.

I spent a long time talking with Ann on Sunday afternoon, both of us stopping to wipe tears away. With rumors of a possible national convention to be held in Dallas soon, what, we wondered, is the Dallas-based Texas Daffodil Society going to do? How will they manage without the irrepressible Dottie Sable and the stalwart, knowledgeable good guy that Rod always was?

But we know this group, and soon you will, too. They learned from a pair who loved the ADS, and they will step up and take over. They have set a tradition of excellence, in Southern Region, but also across the ADS, for holding judging schools every year, in rotation, and for unbelievable cooperation with the Master Gardeners, the Garden Clubs, and youth programs and presentations at County Fairs—nobody does it better. You just need to get ready, because the whole Daffodil World expects quality things from Dallas.

Ann summed it up best, I believe. “Through his knowledge and expertise, Rod inspired all of us to become better daffodil growers and exhibitors. He was a constant presence in the Texas Daffodil Society for many years and will be missed by all who knew him. Godspeed, daffodil friend.”

A memorial Mass was held August 26th at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton church, in Plano. The burial, most fittingly, will at the private cemetery on the family farm near Covington, on Sept. 9. Rod will be laid to rest in the Virginia foothills which were ultimately home to him, no matter how long he traveled the world for the daffodil.

One of Jolene Laughlin’s great people skills as editor is knowing her crew. She knew how I would be writing through tears and took over a couple other of my jobs for this September issue. Because one of the things we learned from Rod Armstrong is that tears are nothing to be ashamed of.

***Loyce McKenzie, Historian** – but most of all a friend who is unashamedly weeping too, and who admits that she’s weeping for herself.*