

A memorial tribute to Robert Benjamin Jr. '71

BY WARREN KALBACKER '71

"Today, life is great." Bob Benjamin '71 pauses. "But you wouldn't think that because I'm in a wheelchair pretty much all the time."

Classmates know Benjamin's wry sense of humor. He adds, "This good life will go on as long as life lasts."

ALS is the reason Bob uses the wheelchair.

"About a year ago, my body started to fail. My back hurt; I had trouble walking. I was out of breath at night.

"I was given a year and a half to live." Bob pauses again. "Well, I've got a year under my belt.

"ALS. Why me?" he asks. Then he answers the question. "Why not me? I drew the short straw.

"Spiritual energy keeps me going," he adds.

Benjamin majored in religion at Trinity, went on to an M.B.A. followed by years on Wall Street. He proudly recalls (perhaps with tongue in cheek), "Wonderful career. I had no compliance issues and no customer complaints.

"My type of ALS affects the extremities first and works its way in. I can speak and tell jokes, if anyone wants to listen. I'm still in life."

Daughters of Israel nursing home has a large staff. The West Orange, New Jersey, facility now has Bob, variously dubbed "mayor" and "president."

"At 71, I'm the new kid on the block. Most people here are in their 80s or 90s. They can be lonely.

"My mission is to bring them joy, to let them know they're important. It's a wonderful gift to be able to deliver."

"Bob is such a charmer. I have to get to know him better," says Ada, 98, his neighbor down the hall.

The self-described new kid has in fact welcomed kids to Daughters of Israel. West Orange High School recently established an intergenerational program. Students visit several times each year to interview residents about their lives and recollections of events. The transcripts of the sessions are then compiled into oral histories. Naturally, Bob addressed the whole student group at an assembly marking the program's kickoff last November.

"Can you leave the cocktail sauce?" he asks a visitor who's delivered freshly shucked oysters. "The cuisine here is pretty bland."

Daughters' cuisine may need spice, but the kitchen brought Benjamin back from a severe weight deficit. He's regained 20 pounds.

Word is out that he taught a woman how get out of her wheelchair and to use the bathroom by herself.

Bob has no formal training in physical therapy. He does have a maxim: "Break the pain barrier, and you will flourish."

He learned about the pain barrier as a Bantam oarsman. A fellow rower recalls, "When the ice was bad on the Connecticut River, we went to practice at a pond. We had to walk the boats barefoot over a sheet of ice."

And Benjamin is no stranger to challenges.

"I was the son of a suicide. I was 17. That taught me to be a good guy," he says.

A classmate recalls that Bob found Trinity to be more than just college. “It was a community for him,” he says. Bob himself remembers that he and friends “were nurtured by the Trinity experience.”

Trinity maintained basic course requirements in the '60s. Prospective—often math challenged—humanities majors did not need the presence of the professor's German shepherd to be intimidated by the fundamental theorem of calculus. (The well-trained canine remained alert but did not make a move.)

Bob and '71 classmates joke about surviving first-year math (no joke at the time).

Later on, he completely beat a much more serious challenge, alcohol.

Benjamin reflects: “What was important to me before my illness? Trinity. Religion. Rowing.”

A print of rowers on calm water at sunset, a gift from Trinity coach Norman Graf, hangs opposite Bob's bed. A blown-up photo of Benjamin's Bantam eight hangs on another wall.

“He could sure move a shell,” says a fellow oarsman.

Benjamin had never picked up an oar before arriving in Hartford. But he rowed all four years at Trinity. He represented the college at Henley Royal Regatta in 1969 and 1971. And he remained “immersed” for four decades, including service as president of the Friends of Trinity Rowing.

He could be spotted, maybe even passing a football game, on his way to a crew event. One of those events: the 2018 dedication of Trinity shell Robert Benjamin Jr.

Benjamin discovered a sport for life at the college. “I rowed on the Harlem River until two years ago,” he says.

He mentored and networked for Bantam rowers for years. Later on, Bob would take an interest in those who had never pulled an oar.

A skateboarder and first-year college student in Manhattan: “Bob motivated me. His goal was to be friendly with everyone in the neighborhood around 117th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem, where he lived.

“I learned a life lesson from hanging out with Bob in my front yard. I can approach people now and start a conversation. He made sure I was focused, and we had our own moments when I wasn't. He urged me to ‘make a decision’ rather than throw myself into the moment. We figured out I'd choose a computer science major.”

Benjamin's volume of Tanakh, the Jewish scriptures, occupies a prominent place near his bed. The rosary displayed nearby is a classmate's gift, blessed by Pope Francis.

Bob's interest in religion is not simply devotional. He's read the works of Rabbi Abraham Heschel and attended lectures with a Roman Catholic laymen's group. At Daughters, he leads a Bible class in which he proposes alternative views of scriptural passages. His approach “shakes up” the seniors.

Benjamin even took his religion major beyond Trinity. “The legalisms of the Bible helped me in business,” he says. Bob studied Deuteronomy thoroughly indeed.

Bob's eager to serve on the committee that will recommend a new rabbi. He relishes the role of inquisitor on Torah and Talmud. He'll no doubt probe to discover whether candidates have a solid foundation in the liberal arts.

From Benjamin's young New York friend: “When he moved to Daughters of Israel, I knew he'd be safe and cared for. I visited him. We texted often. He let me know he didn't have ‘a lot of time.’”

Bob removes an oxygen mask. He considers for a moment and says, “Death may not be all that final.”

Five days later, Bob texted greetings to a group of Bantam friends assembled for a dinner in Cambridge, Massachusetts. That afternoon, he shared pizza with two students from the West Orange High School's intergenerational group. Their assignment, of course, was to elicit his contribution to the oral history project. He may have talked about his Wall Street years or described long-ago events such as Woodstock and Watergate. But knowing Bob, the two students surely left the nursing home challenged to consider their future college choices and their majors. Later the same day, Bob Benjamin died.