

Miracles Part I

“I’ve got strong shoulders. I figured God chose me to go through this. Whenever something bad happens, I figure he must have found another empty spot on my shoulders.”

Linda Blevins, Logan, West Virginia

Being from the agricultural and industrial Midwest, I was somewhat unfamiliar with Black Lung and other pulmonary diseases caused by mining. My author’s advocate from Infinity Publishing in Pennsylvania been deeply touched by loss from Black Lung, and he encouraged me to include a story and information on this disease.

In my search I learned of Leslie Blevins. I read about him and was quite sure, as the account seems to indicate, that it wouldn’t be long after the newspaper telling his story went to print in 1998 that Les would have lost his battle with this cruel disease. There was, however, another – perhaps a divine – plan.

In order to complete my research in early 2003, I needed to talk to Linda Blevins. I thought surely that Les had died and I wanted to speak with Linda about her memories. Calling directory assistance and asking for a listing in Logan, West Virginia, I had no idea first of all, if there would be such a listing, and if there were, if I would get the number, or even then, if Linda would honor my request.

There was indeed a listing for a “L. Blevins” in Logan. I called and left a message explaining who I was and asking Linda to please call just to let me know she got the message, whether or not she wished to talk. About two hours later my phone rang.

“Hello?”

“A throaty voice with a slow Southern drawl, said, “This is Blevins.”

“Oh...yes... is this Linda?”

“This is Les.” His inflection slowly swept upward, making the name ‘Les’ into two syllables.

I was stunned – completely stopped in my tracks, as if I were talking to a ghost. “Oh... well... how are you?”

“Doing fine.”

Here is the story of Leslie Blevins’ battle with silicosis, his wife Linda’s faith, and their astounding victory.

Leslie Blevins has been breaking barriers all his life. The second son of 12 children from a family of hard-working miners, Les grew up in the Pine Creek coal camp just outside Logan, West Virginia. Following the noble family tradition he labored underground for over 21 years. He took pride in providing for his family as a miner, breaking through the natural barriers of this rocky earth to bring forth the fuel, the energy, that is coal. His livelihood would earn him a decent living indeed, but tragically as well, what would seem to be a swift and early death from the most virulent form of Black Lung Disease.

“Working the mines is something I always wanted to do,” Les said. “My dad worked in the mines, Grandpa worked in the mines.” He says slowly, reconciled to the limitations of Appalachian opportunity, “It’s what there was.”

After graduating from high school in 1970, Les and his brother, Virgil, enlisted in the Army. Three years later his enlistment was up, he came home to Logan and married Linda. After a frustrating year of working odd jobs, Les was hired to work a three-foot seam of coal in a union mine. Doing this was something like crawling under a kitchen table and spending the day shoveling from a stooped over position. At the end of the first day, he was so sore from crawling and stooping he couldn’t stand upright. He barely made it home—crawling all the way. He was 23. But the next day, he was back in the mine again. Les remembers, “On my fourth day there I was down on my knees, shoveling, when the earth rumbled and the roof fell in. It broke my left foot and the toes on my right foot.” When his broken bones had healed he was back in the mine. He boldly said, “I’d go back today if I could. I loved the work that much.”

In 1993 the union mine closed. Les was out of work for about six months before being hired to work as a mining-machine operator at a nearby non-union mine. He could finally work standing up because his job at that time was working a seam of coal that was 7 feet high. However, his pay dropped from \$16.92 an hour to only \$11.25. Although this was one of the most dangerous jobs in America, the important thing to Les was that he was supporting his family with a job he loved doing.

After mining the seam of black rock for just about a month, he hit a wall of sandstone. His bosses told him to cut through the sandstone to get to coal that had to be there. “They cleared everybody out of the area where I was doing the cutting because they said they wanted them doing other things,” he said, “But I know now the real reason was they knew how dangerous the dust from working the sandstone is if you breathe it.”

Linda recalls, “I remember it. He’d come home all covered in white dust -- totally exhausted and completely drained. He’d get in his chair and fall fast asleep in minutes. I’d have to wake him up to feed him dinner. Then he’d go right back to sleep for the rest of the night. In the morning, he’d leave for another day of trying to work through the sandstone to find the coal.”

When Les started cutting through the sandstone, he was using a relatively new mining machine operated by a remote control that enabled him to stand out of the way of some of the dust. Les said, “You know, sandstone is much harder than coal, and the work of cutting through it was tearing the machine apart. So the owners decided to make a profit while they still could, and they sold the mining machine. They took a much older machine out of the shop for me to work the sandstone with. This one didn’t have no remote, so I was forced to sit on the machine in the middle of all the dust the machine was making. At times the machine would shake so violently that it would toss me up against the ceiling of the mineshaft. Another thing was, the water sprayers that were supposed to wet down the dust were always breaking down. They were worthless. The dust was so suffocating that sometimes I’d have to shut down the miner, go back into the fresh air and just puke. Then my boss would come by and tell me to go back in and keep working.”

Les spent over three months grinding sandstone to get to the coal. “I knew I’d pay the price for breathing in all that dust,” Blevins said, “I just didn’t think it’d happen so quick.”

The menacing threat of silicosis—the world’s oldest known occupational disease—was known to the Greeks even in ancient times. Les knew the sandstone rock dust was particularly unhealthy, but he explained, “There’s a whole lot of things that wasn’t supposed to be done like it was being done then, but you either did it as you were told to, or you lost your job and went home.”

OSHA requires mine operators to test the air in the mines every two months. This is done to make sure the dust levels don’t exceed the federal limits. Les said, “I never took a dust test while working on cutting through the sandstone. I don’t recall a proper dust sample being taken during the entire two years I worked there.”

According to OSHA records, that company took 12 dust samples during the three months Les was working at cutting through the sandstone. The test samples were supposed to be taken where the mining machine operators were working. However, nine of the tests indicated a measurement of just 0.1 mg. of

dust per cubic meter of air—the readings so unusually clean that the federal experts figured they must be inaccurate. Tests supervised by government mine inspectors during 1991 through 1993 showed far higher amounts of silica dust. As a result of these tests, the company was cited four times in those years of operation for exceeding federal dust limits and fined a total of \$1,681.

In order to keep his job, Les was expected to help conceal this unsafe practice from the federal mine safety inspectors. “Whenever a mine inspector showed up, the bosses would tell me to quit cutting away the sandstone, shut off the power to my work area and go some place else to work in the mine,” Blevins confided. “I didn’t complain because I had a job to do.”

Reminded of the dangers of mining, things he had seen and experienced, even the devastating lung disease members of his own family had known, Les was asked if he ever thought about just getting out. His answer was, “This is what we do. When I was growing up that’s all I looked forward to. It’s just bred into a person.”

Les first noticed breathing problems in 1990. “Getting short of breath is natural for a coal miner.” He says quietly and matter-of-factly, “That’s part of coal mining. Anyway, in 1994, I went to the doctor because my breathing was so bad. The workman’s comp doctor told me I had cancer. That hit hard. So I went back to my family doctor and he did biopsies and other tests, and they said it was silicosis. They did more tests, you know, to rule everything else out. They ruled out TB [tuberculosis] and sarcoidosis. Everything came back [saying that my shortness of breath was being caused by] silicosis.”

...to be continued...

Taken from *Breathe Better, Live in Wellness: Winning Your Battle Over Shortness of Breath* by Jane M. Martin
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