

As in all memoirs we are compelled to bring to life a story of truth – which perpetuates great depth and perception to the meaning of who we are and how we came to be this person who has evolved over time. This particular story was long in development. It took place over a period of nearly four decades. Its content strongly affected me at various phases of a far-from-perfect life. Like many of us, mine was filled with poor choices that resulted in lessons that strongly impacted my life. Don't get me wrong, I regret very little of my past, even with its share of mistakes, or maybe because of these mistakes. The past has brought to my life all of the people I hold close to my heart. Thus resulting in an amazing bond between myself and my three wonderful children, a great son-in-law, and two of the most precious granddaughters ever created (yes, that is a very prejudicial opinion – but one, like all true grandmas, I firmly believe). It has shown me the strength of the love of family and brought to me an abundance of true friends, all of whom have stood beside me and continue to bring warmth and comfort to my life.

I remember once reading somewhere, *Freak the Mighty*, I believe, that remembering is an invention of the mind. Though portions of this story I can remember as vividly as if I were watching them on the 35mm film of my children's younger lives, others seem to be only vague glimpses of the past. This only reinforces the fact that the overall aspect of the story took place, but some of the minute details evade me at the moment of their writings. Strangely enough, on the other hand, there are incidents, which occurred where I can recall the most seemingly inconsequential details of a particular moment, as if I had just experienced them a split second ago. It almost seems as if they are totally disconnected to any other event in my story yet are quite profound in the story's purpose. Strange how the mind works.

As I sit here and reflect, a seemingly endless flow of tears emits from my body. At times I can't decipher if they are tears of joy or sorrow – but they flow intermingled just the same.

I can't even say where it all began, back during the time of the controversial Vietnam War or Veterans Day, 2007 – I guess the two have somehow become one and now, too, are inseparable.

If I were asked to give an exact date as to when I first purchased my POW bracelet, I would be lost for words – I'm not even sure I can give you an exact month or year. I only know that the bracelet I received, bearing the name Capt. Edward Alan Brudno, had a strong impact on my life back then, but that impact was nothing compared to the one it had on me March 25th, 2008.

When I grew up the Vietnam War was a topic of constant debate; a very hot issue with strong views, both pro and con, which divided both family and friends; mine included. The belief to support and honor the United States versus the moral ramifications of an unjust war seemed to cause many unresolved arguments between kith and kin. But it also left many, like myself, caught in the middle. To side with a father who enlisted into the Navy at an early age to protect and defend his country during WWII or an older brother who believed in the injustice and unfairness of being forced to fight a war on foreign soil which had no effect whatsoever on the people or land of the country he was representing was a troubling choice. I knew they were both right, but to separate the two and to pick one over the other was purely impossible for me, as my love for each of them was strong.

The only thing I was sure of was that I wanted to do something to support those who had either made the choice or had the choice made for them to serve in Vietnam. So when I saw the ad in a magazine to order a bracelet to support the families of POWs, I did it. Little did I know that nearly forty years later it would have such a significant impact on my life and the lives of my students.

It all began on Tuesday, November 13, 2007, two days after Veterans Day. I had been working on my lesson plans the previous week, during my preschool planning time, and decided to keep it simple. I would read the book, *Fingertip Friends*, with letters and illustrations by J.H. Stroschin. Then I would follow up with some acrostic poetry with a patriotic theme. Her book includes letters from Jim, a soldier serving in Vietnam, to his parents back in the states; along with responses from Mom which include an endless supply of love and prayers from home. I had met Jane at a LAPS conference on Mackinac Island several years earlier and shared with her my POW experience. She had found it very touching and had me write a short synopsis of it on the front flap of her book and then autographed it for me, a highlight of my conference experience.

After I finished reading the book to my students I was compelled to share with them the same story I had shared with Jane several years earlier. The recreation I told them was a quick ten-minute summary of the story I am about to tell you. It highlighted the key events, minus all of the emotional and personal trauma that was involved.

As a teenager I purchased a POW bracelet from an ad in a magazine – it was maybe \$3.95 – I don't remember exactly. What I do remember is that when it arrived I couldn't wait to see it. I tore open the plain manilla envelope and as the protective padding spewed all over the floor I spied my trophy housed in a small plastic bag. I carefully removed a thin silver bracelet, maybe three quarters of an inch wide. The inscription on the bracelet read: Capt. Edward A Brudno USAF 10-18-65. I removed the bracelet from the package, placed it on my wrist and vowed I would never remove it until he returned home... a probability which seemed more and more unlikely as the war progressed.

The war continued – as did my life – day after day, week after week, year after year. Captain Brudno had become a part of me – winter, spring, summer, fall; day or night; at work or play; through classes and spring break; at home or at college... until that fateful day when the war ended for the US and POWs were being returned home. I remember watching with my college roomies, as the POWs slowly emerged on to the screen before the anxious throngs of people. Family members, friends, complete strangers all bonded together as one to share in this emotional climax to a war's end. I can vividly recall the thousands of waving flags, the cheers of triumph, the smiles, the laughter, the embraces, the tears, from misty-eyed to flowing streams... the ultimate conclusion to the horror many endured for far too long – including Alan – nearly 7 ½ years. The total insanity of it all made it seem surreal. We all sat silently watching and when it was over our emotions mimicked those of the crowds we had just viewed on television. They ranged from euphoric whoops and hollers and muffled sobs to quiet teary-eyed viewers – all of us moved in one way or another by what we had witnessed. That night I remember removing Alan's bracelet from my arm and putting it in an old watch case I had and vowing that someday, somehow, I would return it to him personally. The next evening I cut the articles from the paper, carefully folded them and placed them inside the box with his bracelet. Life went on and all was well with the world – or so I thought...

It was early June, 1973, summer vacation had begun and I was entertaining the idea of marriage in the summer of '74. Sad to say, but thoughts of the Vietnam War and Alan – bearer of the name on my POW bracelet – were a fading memory. Then I saw the headlines – can't remember the exact words, something like: Former POW Commits Suicide; subtitle Capt. Edward Alan Brudno takes own life... instantly the tears began to appear, first a trickle, then a steady stream, and soon they were flowing like a river. "*What is wrong with you*", I thought, "*You didn't even know this man!*" It was true a man I had never met had caused the second major heartbreak of my life (we won't get into the first one!). Somehow through the years of wearing his bracelet Alan had become a part of me, not like a lover, or even a boyfriend – but an integral part of me; a part of my heart, or rather my soul. I was devastated at

his death and remember sitting alone at times and just crying, unable to stop myself. His suicide article became another token put into a box whose contents, I now knew, would never reach the owner of the name upon my bracelet. I carefully placed the memoir in my drawer, where it remained with me always. My life went on – marriage, children, divorce, remarriage. As I moved, it moved with me, just like my TV, cedar chest or family Bible. It was something I knew I would never part with... not ever.

Then I got the word... it was coming to Flint. I can't recall how I got wind of the event, but when I heard about it, something deep inside me was reborn. It was the summer of '88 and The Moving Wall was scheduled to come to Bluebell Beach the end of July, first part of August. Bluebell, less than three miles down the road from my home. Though I had carried Alan's bracelet with me throughout my life over the years its meaning had begun to fade. It had become more of an heirloom to me than the piece of history that it actually was and the coming of The Moving Wall regenerated that meaning. It brought back all of the significance and depth of its meaning and I knew it was time to return this item to its rightful place – but I wasn't sure I had it in me to fulfill such a tall order.

Just like in any decision making, there's the act of making a choice and the act of carrying out that choice – and the mental conflict in between. For me the choice was difficult and carrying it out was painstaking, but the mental conflict – now that was excruciating.

Over the course of the years the case had remained safely tucked away in my top dresser drawer. Except for a nonchalant fingering or an absent-minded touch causing a fleeting memory, it had remained undisturbed.

As I sat at the edge of my bed and gently opened the case my eyes slowly began to mist over. Opening it was like removing the bandage from a deep wound for the first time – as soon as it was exposed to my eyes the pain returned. A pain that had been intensified by time and memories, and the realization that it was time to let go.

The total effect of its contents brought back a mixture of memories ranging from euphoric to devastating. The flashbacks were real and intense, as though I were actually living them over again. The arguments between a father and his son, the instant connection to a total stranger from his capture – through his release – to his untimely suicide. The tears flowed and I slowly closed the case and returned it to the drawer. I knew I wasn't ready.

Throughout the next few days, the bracelet, Captain Brudno and The Wall weighed heavily on my mind. Randomly, and for, seemingly, no apparent reason, tears would begin to flow slowly and quietly from my eyes.

About a week went by before I got the box out again. Upon opening it all of the flashbacks began playing through my mind again, like a timeless rerun from an old TV series. But this time, somehow, something was different. I carefully removed each item from the case and set them down before me. Soon my head began to swim with thoughts. But, surprisingly, they were no longer about my family, or even about Captain Brudno. They were about me. Maybe I should rephrase that because the thoughts were directly linked to my past and all related to previous events, but they were now from my viewpoint, sort of like a third party perspective. Everything I had experienced up until now had been from an objective outlook – similar to an outsider observing any given phenomenon and responding accordingly. But on that day I began to see them in a different light.

Life had become difficult for me, since my divorce in the early 80s. I had become a single parent with three small children and though I was working a full time job at the school, my meager income barely kept my head above water. Soon I met and later married my second husband. Though he was a good-hearted man, who loved all of us greatly, he was also an alcoholic, an emotionally abusive alcoholic, which brought into my life a whole new set of circumstances to deal with. My father had been diagnosed with cancer in 1985, after a seizure at **work** had sent him to the hospital via an ambulance. Less than a year later, after months of radiation and painful bouts of chemotherapy I stood, with my sister, along side the hospital bed in my parents' bedroom both cursing and thanking God for answering my prayers as my father breathed his last breath. His death put an end to his pain and a void to my life. In my eyes, I had always been Daddy's little helper and he had always been my source of strength, my counselor. Though I loved my Mother dearly, Dad was the one I would always go to with my problems for a listening ear and good advice. His death, like that of any loving father to a child, affected us all very deeply. My husband, Kenny, who had already lost both of his parents, was there for me through the whole ordeal.

Sitting there, I began to draw similarities between Alan's life and my own. Please don't misunderstand – I in no way compared the minor misgivings of my life to the horrendous conditions and sufferings that Alan endured as a POW – that would be foolishly ludicrous, but I did begin to find common threads. Alan felt the need to be the rock upon which fellow prisoners came for strength, comfort, and understanding. As a single mom, I had a similar need to be the rock of strength for my children. Both of us hoped to bear the bulk of pain and anguish to spare those we cared about. Like Alan, I too had become the source of laughter and focus of hope for those around me. We both were driven by some deep force to destroy the enemy; for Alan his Vietnamese captors and prisoner moral, for me alcoholism and my family's well being.

Captain Edward Alan Brudno had succeeded in his mission. His stamina and patriotic heroism inspired those around him. After more than seven and one half years of captivity he came home a free man. Upon their release the POWs returned to a country who despised the war, and though grateful for the return of the released POWs, definitely did not look upon them as heroes; actually they preferred to simply ignore them, hoping the ugly scars would go away. Alan was more fortunate than some, he came home to the woman who had been his own personal source of strength when things had become too much for him to bear. Debby, his wife, for whom he had spent countless hours composing and memorizing a work of poetry that would convey to her all he had endured and more. This poem spoke with every fiber of his being, all that preyed heavily on his mind during his times of weakness and despair, to the woman he longed to see and be with once again. His prayers were answered and his dream to be with her once again had come true. But in this harsh world of reality, sometimes the things we want the most still cannot release us from the nightmares that haunt us from the past. The ones from which there is no escape. This was the case with Alan, for only four short months after his long-awaited return home he took his own life, a victim of war even more traumatic and costly than a fellow serviceman who had died on the battlefield. Alan became a casualty of war, whose name would not be on that Moving Wall, because his death was self-inflicted here in America – even though the deep, penetrating wounds were inflicted upon enemy soil.

As I thought, I laughed at the inane analogies I was drawing between Alan and myself. The ridiculous connections were just a little too far out there, or were they? Since my divorce I felt I had to become my children's source of strength. They saw their father every other weekend, Wednesdays for dinner, and the usual times during vacation periods, but I believed it was my responsibility to instill in them the basic beliefs, values and morals that would help them to survive in life. We had love of family and friends and the belief that through it all that was what was most important. They learned lessons about

financial hardship, as well as giving to those less fortunate than themselves. They learned about starting fresh and making new friends in new schools. They learned about acceptance and forgiveness, about the death of a loved one, and about how love can sometimes bring pain as well as happiness. They learned the eminent importance of the simple things in life and the value of personal success.

At the same time I was instilling these lifelong values into my children I had begun to walk on eggshells, so to speak, in my own world. Trying to protect my family from the emotional trauma of an alcoholic stepfather, whose love for them was never questioned, and keeping myself from going under, had become a daily job and was beginning to take its toll on me. I was allowing my own values to shift to keep a stable atmosphere in my home and I was beginning to doubt my own self-worth, falling into the typical delusions of loved ones of alcoholics who blame themselves for the problems of the alcoholic. IN retrospect, this was a period of realization for me and as I look back upon it – it was then when my healing began and my second marriage started to end. It was when I regained my strength of self and family and the desire for survival overtook all other aspects of my life. I began reading Al Anon books and thoughts of meetings began to enter my head. I began to talk openly to my kids about their stepfather's disease, instead of trying to cover for it. We discussed it as if it were their Grandpa's cancer, with periods of remission and the effects of what "falling off the wagon" might entail.

I made many visits to the site of my father's grave during those days – the strength and love I gained from my long talks with him gave me the conviction and determination to go on. As a family we struggled for several more years, but soon the bad times outweighed the good and my second marriage ended. Through my friends, family, and Al Anon, I survived, and along with my children gained a new understanding of life's hardships and their well-hidden assets of insight and inner strength.

Anyway, it was here that I decided I was not going to become a victim. Like Alan, I was going to pull myself out of this situation and along with my children, we were going to survive. But unlike Alan, this survival was going to be a new beginning for me, and not the beginning of the end.

Alan's resilience and contagious patriotism became my motivation and hope for survival. The threads were there, the bonds created and set into motion. Alan had completed his mission with me and I knew then why I had never thrown out the bracelet and the true purpose of it in my life, but now I had a second dilemma.

The Moving Wall was a tribute to Vietnam War heroes, people who had valiantly fought; servicemen who gave their lives in battle. The battle Alan fought on enemy terrain was a long horrendous ordeal with wounds penetrating so deep that they eventually ended up taking his life, but not on Vietnamese soil, here in the US, and sadly by his own hand. Alan's name was not on The Moving Wall, so technically was it right for me to leave his memoirs at its feet? Would others see this as a slur against men who had died in the heat of battle? Would they view him as weak? See me, as unpatriotic, insulting 'true war heroes'?

As usual when something was bothering me, I found myself spending a lot of time sitting under the oak tree at the foot of Daddy's gravesite. Most times we would talk – me speaking, then recreating in my mind what Dad might say in return, tears eminently falling throughout our conversations.

Eventually, I would just go and sit and my head would slowly fill with the pros and cons of taking Alan's bracelet to The Moving Wall. Then stragely the ideas would filter through some unknown sieve and I would leave feeling more confident about the choice I was leaning towards. In the end, I would just take a quick drive by what I had come to think of as our little chat room and my eyes would

become moist, with an occasional tear escaping. I knew then that the decision I had made was right and Daddy would be proud of me.

Other than the seeming endless three-mile journey down my road, taking me to my destination, I recall very little about the day's activities that brought me to my arrival at Bluebell Beach. What I do remember is that it was a perfect summer day. The sun shone brightly, like a solitary pearl slowly drifting across an ocean of blue sky. It was late afternoon and the air was filled with the freshness of summer. The birds were fluttering about the trees. Fruit was ripening in various stages in the trees surrounding my home, and the smell of a recently mowed lawn mingled with the sweet scent of moss roses as I stepped out my back door heading for the car. It was one of those days that made you marvel at the simple wonders of a greater force, a greater force that I was sure I would soon be calling on shortly for the strength to complete my day's agenda.

I was firm in my convictions and had placed Alan's memoirs into a small plastic case the preceding evening, thinking it would be more resistant to foul weather. I had begun to think of it as a portable mausoleum, holding all the treasures of our life together. There is a part of me, somewhere deep inside, that vaguely remembers having written a final goodbye, maybe a letter or poem, but for the life of me I cannot remember its contents. (Unfortunately, I don't possess Alan's gift of memorization or maybe I just didn't see the purpose of putting to memory the words of a last farewell.) I am quite certain (and I wince at the word certain) that it was carefully folded and situated inside the container alongside the other tokens of the life we'd shared together. There are also faint glimpses of a solitary rose – though I can't be sure if I had left petals of it inside or had just thought that it would have been a nice touch (twenty years is a long time to remember back to.) I understand that they now have a museum containing artifacts that have been left at The Moving Wall – maybe someday I'll make it to D.C. and satisfy the questions unanswered by my fading memory.

I can gratefully say, that though I had known men who had served in Nam – all had returned home safely, yet still altered emotionally by all that they had undergone before. Except for Alan, whose name was not even on The Wall – because of his death on American soil, there was no personal connection between myself, and any name on that Wall. That's not to say that a connection was nonexistent. Believe me, the connection not only existed but, manifested itself instantaneously when my eyes beheld this massive symbol of honor.

As I approached the historic symbol of heroism I beheld before me a panorama of faceless names. An intermingling of servicemen, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard; of men – husbands, fathers, grandfathers, brothers, sons, lovers, friends; of heroes who gave their all to a cause with no thought to their own fate, oblivious to all signs of victory. A panorama of death – inexcusable, horrific deaths. An overwhelming sense of humility overtook me as I stood in awe of its presence. The anticipation was building, yet feelings of apprehension were beginning to filter in. Strange how the two can coexist simultaneously. I stood motionless for quite some time holding my meager offering, before I resumed my approach.

Walking down the plank sidewalk that stretches along the base of The Moving Wall I couldn't help but to overhear people sharing their stories with each other. I would walk slowly by, not meaning to pry, but curiously listening intently, hungry to hear what paths of fate had brought us all together on this day. Like me many of them had brought tokens to leave beneath the names of loved ones past and present, known and unknown – all with a story, all with a distinctive connection to history yet forever linked to all future generations.

A grandmother introducing her grandchildren to their grandfather for the first time, a faded photo in her hands, telling of his heroic act of bravery that took his life while saving that of a fellow comrade.

A uniformed Vet sobbing yet another 'thank-you' to the hero who flew him out safely to the area Medical Unit, but was shot down on his next rescue mission and is still classified as missing in action.

A solitary man sitting unmoving in his wheelchair, misty eyed, gently whispering, over and over, "Why you and not me?"

The few remaining members of a battalion of hundreds who somehow, through no fault of their own, made it out physically unscattered – but emotionally and mentally altered forever, clinging to shadows of the past and yet somehow living in the present.

I began thinking how small and insignificant my story with Alan seemed in comparison to the tragic details of those being shared by the people around me. I began to wonder if I should just go back home. I remember turning to leave with my parcel in hand, when a man in fatigues came up to me and asked if I needed help finding a name on The Wall. I proceeded to tell him that the name of the man I came to pay honor to was not written upon that wall. He had been a POW who had safely returned home only to fall victim to the set of perilous conditions, which hindered his return home and ultimately caused his death. I told him of the stories I overheard as I walked the length of this profound symbol of bravery, and unsure I now felt about leaving Alan's bracelet there. The man told me that all Veterans were heroes of war, no matter where or when they served and they all deserved to be honored no matter what turn of fate cost them their life. Then he suggested I take a few minutes to be sure of my decision and quietly walked away leaving me alone with my inner struggle.

In looking back, I now know that he had rationalized that some strong force had brought me this far and he felt that I should see it through. I turned and began walking solemnly toward my car. As I made my way to the parking lot I started to silently rehash the pros and cons of my initial choice, the long conversations I'd shared with Dad and the underlying reasons for the final decision that had brought me to this moment. Was Captain Edward Alan Brudno's story really so different than the ones I had overheard as I purposefully ventured along the walkway at the foot of this historical replica?

It was that moment that those warm caressing arms of my father seemed to slowly wrap themselves around me again. I could feel his presence and hear his voice softly whispering in my ear, seeming to echo the very words I had just heard moments ago from the soldier standing watch over his fellow countrymen, coaxing me to listen to my heart. Compelling me to not let others make me stray from what I truly believed in the depths of my soul to be the right thing, to follow my inner voice, the one that had brought me here in the first place. The tears soon began to emit from the inner corners of my eyes and trickle slowly down my cheeks. I remember standing there for some time without moving, just relishing the presence of his embrace and letting the tears fall. I'm not sure precisely how long I stood there suspended between my car in the parking lot and The Wall, nor what exactly nudged me back to the present. The tears that had started so slowly now stopped in the same manner and I turned back to answer the call of The Wall behind me. With a new felt sense of purpose I made my way back. I passed by the soldier whom I had talked to just moments before and we both exchanged soft, knowing smiles.

I proceeded down the walkway and stopped near the center of The Wall. There, facing The Wall, I stood momentarily before crouching at its feet. Lowering my head, I gently placed the remnants of Alan's brief history with me at the base of the wall. My heart knew immediately what it was parting with and I instinctively realized how much I would miss this "friend" that was being left behind. Again

the tears fell from my eyes, only this time they were tears of pride, not uncertainty. The man I was remembering, was a hero like no other. A man whose heart and strength of character made him a block upon which others built their hopes and beliefs. He gave others the courage and spirit to go on when it was so much easier to just give up. Alan had inspired many fellow countremen to hold tight to the true values of life and to survive at all costs, the very same inspirations he had passed on to me just a few days earlier. It had worked for our country's soldiers and I was determined it would work for me.

As I slowly lifted my head, I could see in the wall of granite before me the shadow of the soldier to whom I had spoken. He was standing at attention, directly behind me, and saluting the soldier I had come to bid farewell. His silhouette engulfed me in a cool shade of comfort and peace. I remained there, crouching for quite some time, even later I watched the shadow fall at ease, turn and walk away, leaving me alone once again with my thoughts. At that precise moment the gesture was as symbolic to me as the salute of Little John Jr. to his father, as he stood at his mother's side at the funeral of the late President Kennedy. Like this moment that was frozen eternally in time by photographers from around the world, I knew this image would remain with me always. The visual memory of that solitary soldier's final salute was instantly and permanently etched into the depths of my soul. Looking back, it seems coincidentally appropriate to have honored these two men in such a similar manner.

January 31, 2009