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**Gil Tabor: Profile in Courage**

**Written By Leon Thompson**

Saturday, May 16, 2009

**Service Center namesake copes with ALS**

ST. ALBANS -- When you haven't seen Gilbert Tabor for years, you want to shake his hand, even if it does rest on the right arm of a motorized wheelchair. So you extend your right arm. But then ...

"I can't lift mine," he says. "I'd like to. I can't."

Then you feel it. A full-body apology washes over you like a cold shower, because you simply didn't know it had progressed this far.

Last time you saw Gil, he was laughing and joking and shaking more hands than anyone could count at a celebration at the immigration and naturalization center in St. Albans, named appropriately for him.

So you squeeze Gil's shoulder. Tell him it's good to see him. Because it is. And he asks that you not be sad. Not for him. Not for Gil Tabor.

"Look," he says, trying to snap you out of it. "It costs exactly the same to laugh as it does to cry. I might as well laugh."

So he does, because he can. For now.

The mysterious grip of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) - commonly known as Lou Gehrig's Disease - nibbles at Gil. For him and about 30,000 other people nationwide, ALS acts like the photo negative of Alzheimer's Disease. Instead of erasing the mind and sparing the body, ALS paralyzes the body and keeps the brain cognizant, so that its owner is aware of most everything around him.

Hard telling which is more tortuous.

Eventually, Gil won't move. No swallows. No nods. No smiles. He might be able to blink. Maybe.

In time, Gil will die of ALS. He is 71.

"I certainly don't look forward to it," he says. "I don't know if it scares me. But there's also no sense being afraid of something you don't know about."

Lots of people know Gil Tabor. He founded and directed the Vermont Service Center (VSC) in the basement of the St. Albans City Post Office, in 1981.

At the time, Gil had 880 square feet of working space and a \$6,000 budget. The U.S. immigration application backlog stretched back 8 1/2 years, with some individual files bulking up to 4 inches thick.

Gil and his staff worked with a manual typewriter and second-hand furniture.

"I knew then and I know now why this place is so successful," Gil said at the VSC's twenty-fifth birthday party in 2006. "It's the people who work here." He got two standing ovations that day.

Now, the expanded VSC - known as the Gilbert C. Tabor Complex - sits in southwest St. Albans City residing in a 125,000-square-foot building on the campus of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

Gil still talks passionately about the inner-workings of immigration, as though the president has just named him Homeland Security director.

When Gil retired from 26 1/2 years of federal service in September 1993, he had accumulated an amazing two years of sick time. About six years later, he watched his close friend, Paul Stein, die of ALS.

"I knew where I was headed when they told me I had it," Gil says. "Let's put it that way."

But ALS would wait. From 2000 to 2006, the man who rarely called in sick during a quarter century of work contracted, fought, and beat prostate, kidney and bladder cancer.

"I'd just get well from one and have another," he says.

Then he felt good. Great. Healthy. He and his wife of 53 years, Jane, traveled. He hunted. Fished. Trapped. Because he could. And loved to.

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**Letters To The Editor**

**How can we help this family survive?**

On Thursday, March 25, 2009, at 11 :00 p.m., at the residence of Celine Blondel and Melanie Strie [...more.](#)

**Why not ask the voters their thoughts?**

The gay marriage bill, S.115 was voted this week in the House. During the debate I co-sponsored a [...more.](#)

**To the governor, please reconsider**

To Governor Douglas: I read with interest your statement of a week ago regarding your planned vet [...more.](#)

**Tolerance must be reciprocal**

It is disheartening that when the general public wakes up and speaks out on issues of importance

In April 2007, an abdominal aortic aneurism put him under a surgeon's scalpel. Six weeks into his recovery, he headed out to cut wood on his Derby Line property, where he retreated after retirement. He couldn't start his chainsaw.

Frustrated by the thought of weakening with age – and he initially wrote it all off as that – Gil bought a chainsaw with an automatic starter. Problem solved.

In the fall, however, during target practice, he couldn't pull his bowstring. He also couldn't step onto his field tractor. His doctor prescribed two months of physical therapy. He didn't improve.

On April 14, 2008, Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center doctors told Gil he had ALS. Jane was with him. He had three to five years to live, they said. He's down a year on both ends of his prognosis.

"I think, in some ways, I've fooled them a little bit so far," he says. "By now, I probably shouldn't be swallowing or maybe even talking."

"They're amazed by his breathing, too," adds his daughter, Andrea Allen.

ALS is caused by the degeneration of nerve cells in the central nervous system that control voluntary muscle movement. New York Yankees star Lou Gehrig brought the disease to the national spotlight after he was diagnosed with it in 1939. He died at age 37. Renowned physicist Stephen Hawking also has ALS.

No test provides a diagnosis. There is no definitive cause or cure. Pharmaceutical treatment is minimal, although Gil takes two daily doses of the FDA-approved and experimental drug Rilutek, which slows motor neuron damage and prolongs life by a few months.

The Tabors have made their home handicap accessible and acquired a van with help from Compassionate Care ALS, a Massachusetts non-profit that focuses on patient comfort, not research.

"They help us with things that nobody really ever presented to us," Andrea says, speaking of Compassionate Care. "They're just amazing."

Last August, Andrea, her husband, Dean, and their 15-year-old daughter, Kasside, uprooted themselves from sunny Homosassa, Fla., and moved into the Tabors' Derby Line ranch home. Like her father, Andrea worked for immigration service – for 18 years. This fall, she begins coursework in nursing via Vermont Technical College.

"I never thought I'd want to be a nurse," she says, "and then this has happened to Daddy. Everything happens for a reason. Daddy's been a wicked inspiration."

She only thinks of her father's demise when she's moody or cranky.

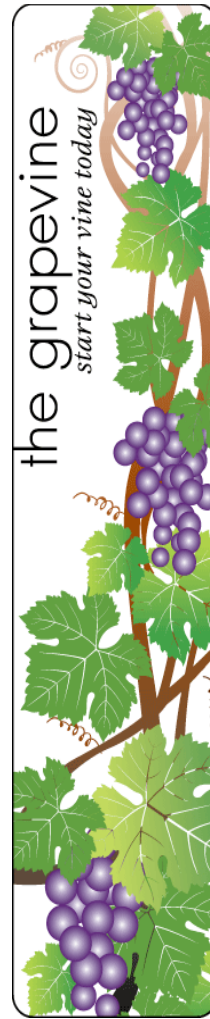
"I try very hard not to think about it at all," she says. "I try to look at the good times."

Gil still has them. He watches the Red Sox, visits with friends, and goes on bike rides with his family – laughing as he zooms ahead in his wheelchair.

He knows how he wants to spend his remaining time.

"I want to go fishing," he says. "That's what I want to do. I've had a good life. I've done a lot of things. I don't feel like I got left out."

**Reader Comments**



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**From the Commissioner: Editorial on target, but changes need to happen**

I read with great interest your editorial entitled "Vt Needs to Expand its School Year&rdqu

[...more.](#)

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Proudly introducing our new chefs Faith Amroune and Jeremy Ratta. Try our New Fall Menu items.

**Stories From U!**

**The art of public art:**

**'Art of Action' finalist has a mission**

FLETCHER — Photographer Clair Dunn is alarmed by the changes that have turned the Vermont landscape from farms and fields, to more and more dwellings.

**Students enjoy local food connection**

By JOY CHOQUETTE  
Messenger Staff Writer

FAIRFIELD — Over the years many children have become less familiar with what grows in the garden and how the food they eat comes to end up on their plates.

**BFA grad Marine's athlete of year**

By LISA M. BOUCHER  
Messenger Correspondent

U.S. Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant, and 1994 Bellows Free Academy, St. Albans graduate, Kenneth Young has been named the U.S. Marine Corps 2007 Male Athlete of the Year.

**Gentlemen, start your competition!**

**Enosburg High graduates in national contest**

By MELISSA BETTY  
Messenger Staff

ENOSBURG FALLS — Cold Hollow Career Center students Jeremy Bushey and Lance Swick, along with their auto instructor, Baxter Weed, can't wait to leave Sunday afternoon for Dearborn, Mich.

**Farmers Market has new goals**

By JOY CHOQUETTE  
Messenger Correspondent

ST. ALBANS — Victor Gruen, the architect who created the first mall in America once said, "It is our belief that there is much need for shopping centers—market places that are also centers of community and cultural activities." Gruen's marketing practices