

Eugene "Gene" Hilton: A Man After God's Own Heart

Gene Hilton was born and raised in Kingsport, Tennessee. Served as a marine, worked as a postman, fathered seven children, and remained loyal as a husband for fifty-three years. His love for the Lord, his family, and everyone he encountered depicted what every Christian should seek mimic. His presence will be greatly lost, but his influence and legacy will live on for generations to come.

November 5, 2014

Wednesday afternoons: they are unlike the rest of my hectic days. As a student at East Tennessee State University and a member of the university's volleyball team, I find myself all too busy the majority of the time; however, Wednesday afternoons are often quite nice. I am able to catch up on some schoolwork, grab a bite to eat while *sitting*, or perhaps even sneak in a short nap. On the Wednesday of November 5, 2014, however, I was not able to do such things.

I am enrolled in the education program at ETSU, and I have recently been placed at University School to do my student teaching. I spend my Wednesday mornings there. I keep my phone stowed away in my backpack, but at lunch I stuck it into my pocket because there was an email from a professor that I needed to

check on. I slipped away to the bathroom to take care of the response, and I had two text messages from Gabe, my boyfriend:

1st text: Hey Jam, call me when you are done with your placement.

2nd text: Hey you just need to call me when you can.

My heart rate immediately started to rise. One “call me” would not have worried me, but the second let me know without a doubt that bad news was about to come.

I leaned against the bathroom stall, standing straight in front of the mirror. I could feel and see the worry in my expression. The phone did not ring for very long, perhaps two tones. He answered in a solemn voice,

“Hey Jam, are you done with your placement?”

“No, I’m in the bathroom, but what is going on?”

“Well I don’t want you to get upset right now, but it is pretty serious.”

“It’s ok... I’ll be ok... What is it...”

“Pap woke up in the middle of the night last night with some back pain. Granny took him to the hospital, and the aneurism he’s had ruptured. And he immediately passed away.”

My heart hurt. Gene Hilton, Gabe’s grandfather, (known to all family and many close friends as “Pap”) has had serious health issues in the past years. He has endured multiple heart problems and surgeries, and the distant family has even come into town to say their “goodbyes” at close calls; however, Pap has always miraculously recovered. According to one of his daughter’s, Amy, “The Good Lord

knows this family needs him, so he's just going to let him keep sticking around."

Despite the luck and mercy that he has been shown over the past years, Gene Hilton, at age 79, passed away on November 5, 2014.

I exited the bathroom and quickly sought my mentor teacher, Mrs. Hammonds. With a glossy gaze in my eyes, I immediately explained the situation to her. She expressed her condolences and insisted that I leave. Tears started to roll down my face as I walked down the steps of the University School halls, and I kept my face down to avoid high school students seeing their "Student Teacher" in a state of shame. I arrived to my car and immediately left for Pap and his wife's ("Granny") home in Kingsport where Gabe and his parents were with the majority of the remaining relatives.

Once I made it to my car and was on the road, I began to think. *My boyfriend's grandfather died. Most people wouldn't care this much. But it is just different with Pap. It's just different.*

Gabe and I have been close friends since elementary school, and considering the tight-knit family bond that his family shares, I have been around Pap since the start of my and Gabe's relationship. My interaction with Pap had not simply been the routine interactions that family tends to have, but instead we both went out of our way to see one another. He made it a point to come to my volleyball games, (when his health allowed) and I made it a point to make regular visits, sometimes even without Gabe.

I drove, and memories and thoughts about this wonderful man poured into my mind. His looks, his words, his laugh. He always wore worn out blue jeans

(except when he was in church, where slacks were appropriate). I assumed he had more than one pair, but they always had the same weathered look. His shirt was usually a button up shirt of a somewhat neutral color with a front pocket. The pocket generally contained at least one pen and a notepad and at times the checkbook (he took care of all the finances of the family, so this was only natural). The shirt tucked in beneath a leather belt. He usually wore a baseball cap (to cover up his shiny bald head). His cap would represent either the football team of the local high school, Dobyns-Bennett, or of the Tennessee Vols. He was an avid fan of both, and he was consistent to keep up with both programs, despite their records. The white mustache that hovered above his lip matched the two patches that he had remaining on the sides of his head above his ears that at one point heard well, but that day had passed. Hearing aids were desperately needed, but due to his stubborn attitude, he refused. But, his lack of hearing didn't ever seem to be too big of an issue. People talked louder to him because they wanted his company, and if he didn't hear, he didn't have a problem telling them to speak up. His loud, blunt delivery was enough to make anyone crack a smile.

Pap was a man whose love and care for his family was a close second behind his love for the Lord. His wife, Jolene, was his for fifty-three years, and their four kids—John, Amy, Tara, and Regina—had brought him joy and stress (as kids tend to do) over the years. In addition, his wife had been previously married, (her husband tragically died in an explosion at Eastman, the nearby chemical plant, early in their marriage) and she brought two more children, Jimmy and Kim, to the table. Kim had a child, Benjamin, at a young age, and due to her inability to substantially provide

for her son, Pap made the decision that he and Granny would raise him as well. Even though he did not biologically parent three of the seven children, his continual presence and involvement in their lives gave them good reason to call him “Dad.” An outsider would have no idea that the children of the family came from different circumstances. He taught them to have a brotherly love for one another, despite their various backgrounds.

Until this day, I had never had someone that I was genuinely this close to and involved with pass away. My own grandfather had passed away, but due to his illnesses at my early age, my memories were few and faint; however, Gene Hilton was not just my significant other’s grandfather that I saw on occasion and had formal interactions with. No, he was the man that I traveled to the opposite end of church to see during the “stand up and greet your neighbor” time. He was the man that loved homegrown tomatoes so much that I couldn’t resist to take him some when my family’s garden was flourishing of red tomatoes each July. I loved seeing his face light up and his voice raise with love and approval of my gesture. He was the man that I would sit with in his oversized recliner at his home and eat peach cobbler with while he complained about the Tennessee Vols Football Program during the late fall and winter months of the SEC season. He was the man who would leave his coffee in the microwave every single time he would heat it up, and each time I found it I would give him such a hard time about getting old and becoming forgetful. He was the man that told me I was “too goodlookin’ “ for his grandson, but that Gabe sure was a good man and would treat me right. He was the man who told me he

loved me each time Gabe and I left his home from a visit. He was part of my family—well, rather, I was part of his.

Appropriately, the rain came down my windshield as the tears came down my cheeks on that drive to their home in Kingsport. My heart hurt—for selfish reasons, but also for Pap's biological family's well being. I knew he really was the glue that the family needed, and without him, well I really didn't know what would come to pass.

I reached Granny and Pap's home on Oakley Road in Kingsport, and unsurprisingly their driveway and the entire road were lined with vehicles—vans, cars, and trucks—all with drivers that had come quickly to grieve and comfort one another at the sudden loss of their dear Pap. The outpouring of love from family and church members was expected considering his loyal involvement to both. Gabe was waiting for me right inside the open garage, and I quickly found refuge in his embrace. His heart was broken. My heart was broken. But somehow a little bit of comfort could be found in the common ground of understanding that we shared.

I knew that just a few feet away there was a house full of other people who hurt deeply as well, and as we passed the threshold, the magnitude of mourning was evident. As the hugs were passed, the tears continued to fall. Not much was said, and not much needed to be. The mood eventually started to lighten; smiles were seen, and laughs were even heard. Then, another family member or close friend would enter and the process would repeat itself—hugs, tears, looks and words of empathy, and then smiles again. The routine was emotionally tolling, but eventually a relatively stable atmosphere of joyful sadness came to fill the room. I was more

puffy-eyed and red-cheeked that I approved of, and I left the living room to find a bit of seclusion.

I snuck away to their bedroom and sat on the master bedroom bed—the bed that Granny and Pap had gotten into so naively just a few short hours earlier. I noticed a stack of bibles on the desk and grabbed the one that I thought I remembered Pap having at church each Sunday. It was a five by eight bible with a worn black leather jacket. The pages had at once been white, but through their constant turning, travel, and age, they had changed to more of a light brownish-yellow. I opened it up and found “Gene Hilton” written in a faded pencil marking on the inside of the jacket along with a plethora of other notes I quickly began to decipher. His handwriting made the decoding difficult, but each note referenced scriptures that stuck out to him and how it should be applied to his life. I made it past what had at one time been the “blanks” of the book and searched through the text. Ink colored of black, blue, green, navy, and red inhabited the worn pages. Notes filled the margins, and with so many different things underlined I thought that he may have well have not even underlined at all! Some passages were underlined three and four times; his constant return to passages once covered was quite evident.

I immediately felt so intimately connected to his life. This was the book he lived by, he studied, he dove into daily, he *knew*. Each passage that was marked

“Each passage that was marked about how to live a Christian life was not simply marked in his bible, but it was executed in his daily walk.”

about how to live a Christian life was not simply marked in his bible, but it was executed in his daily walk. I flipped again to the front of the bible. Many of the blanks were covered with notes written at all sorts of angles, but there was one page that was much more structured and much more concise. It said:

Daily Prayer

Ask God to Give you wisdom *John 1:5*

Ask God to Guide your walk *Isaiah 10:21*

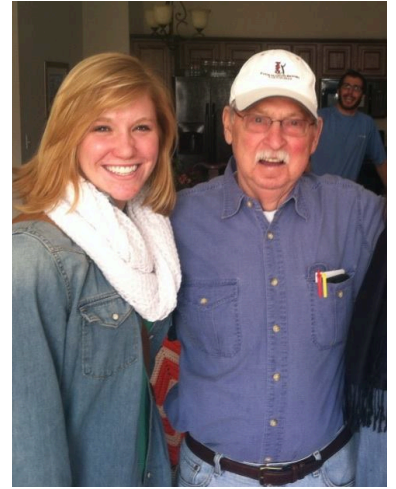
Ask God to Guide your way *Psalms 134*

Lord I Need

Thee Every Hour

The simplicity of the writing was lovely. And with every ounce of who I am, I believe that he prayed these prayers daily and sought the Lord in all he did. He engaged in relationships with everyone he could—young and old. He made it a point to show God’s love in all he did. He made others feel loved, which made others have an unnatural love and admiration for him. Although the “death of my boyfriend’s grandfather” on the surface sounds like a distant, uninvolved, and insignificant death that I would have minimal emotional connection to, Gene Hilton’s care for

everyone he came in contact with, including myself, was strong and significant. He was filled with wisdom, and the impact he has had on those he has encountered will certainly impact generations to come.



A picture taken of Pap and me from 2013

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