

ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN "TODAY" WILMINGTON STAR NEWS ~ JANUARY 24, 2004 EDITION

Spokesman for God

Randy Ward has turned misfortune
into the heart of his singing ministry

By Amanda Greene
Staff Writer

Sitting at his kitchen table, Randy Ward smiled while describing how a drunk driver changed his life forever. He grinned while telling how he begged the Columbus County man to slow the car he was riding in, how they wrecked on a curve going about 150 mph, and how he woke up three days later in Fort Dragg's Womack Army Hospital without the use of his legs — robbed of his dream to play football for the U.S. Army after high school.

"I knew that the only way out of these tobacco fields for me was running and playing football for the Army, and I couldn't do that anymore. When I first got hurt, I wanted to kill the guy who wrecked the car, and I thought about how I would do it," he said. "But not anymore." The 50-year-old Mr. Ward's attitude of acceptance toward that event 34 years ago has led him to help others with his voice. During the past two years, he has started a traveling music ministry he calls "Gospel on Wheels: The Man in the Wheelchair Singing for Jesus."

With his first record under his belt, Mr. Ward travels with his trailer of equipment and sings almost every week at churches in South Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee and across his home state. In his concerts, "I'm rapping back and forth and shaking hands and singing," in his smooth country voice that has soulful warbles reminiscent of Elvis Presley.

When he's not traveling, he sings Sunday services at his own church, Abundant Life Assembly of God. (Ironically, the church, now sits in the same field and corner where Mr. Ward had his accident in 1970.) "The music director sings with me because she has an impenetrable voice. She's had to the bone," he said, laughing. "I tell her that she makes me sound good, and I make her look good."

His influence is important to the members of Abundant Life. "He has a real desire to see people come to the church because he knows where he's come from. He feels like he's now right where he needs to be because he can minister to people who feel like life is just doom and despair," said the Rev. Jerry Spivey, the church's pastor. "He doesn't like people to call him handicapped. He says, 'I'm not handicapped, I just don't have the use of my legs.' It really inspires people he's around to see his attitude."

Testimony also is an important part of his ministry, because he knows his optimistic view of the world didn't come instantly. Mr. Ward realizes his peace took years of blaming God for the accident, drug and alcohol abuse, the death of his wife and a rediscovery of his faith.

"I find time when I'm doing a concert in a church to touch on my life story," Mr. Ward said. "I tell them if he can change me, and if you want to change, then you can do it."

For Mr. Ward, who discovered his vocal talents in high school, singing fulfills his soul. "It's a high like no drug could be. I sing from the heart," he said.

The gospel singer will tell you he knows a thing or two about drugs. Though Mr. Ward grew up going to church in the Ole Desk community in Columbus County, after his accident, Mr. Ward blamed God for the loss of his dream. "I wanted to beat him up. I cursed God out and said I was never going back to church," he said.

Then he moved to California, and, for 12 years, he buried his despair in drugs. "The first thing in the morning was a joint and the last thing at night was a joint, and I took pills during the daytime," Mr. Ward added. "I would take a joint and stick it in my butt so I would get a sore and have to go to the hospital. And I could get drugs there." He realizes now: "That's a sick puppy who would do something like that."

But it was during one of those hospital trips that Mr. Ward realized God had not forgotten him. He picked up a Bible near his hospital bed and started reading in the book of Job, and identified with the character of Job. He left the hospital, went to a Jimmy Swaggart revival and got saved.

"I was in the midst of a metamorphosis. I sort of got tired of doing drugs and came back into reality," he said. He stopped taking drugs and started going to church again, though his wife at the time was still doing drugs.

But he said the major turning point in his life came in 1984 when his wife died in her sleep from an overdose of barbiturates. "That's when the reconstruction period began. I kept thinking to myself, that could've been me," he said. "I realized that what you follow up with is what you become so in a way, her death set me free" from his drug addiction because he realized that death was one possible consequence of his habit. Mr. Ward left California and started going to Roanoke Bible College in Elizabeth City to get right with God "because I was afraid I was next." He left the college before graduating "because I realized that preaching wasn't my calling," and returned to live in Southeastern North Carolina, starting two wheelchair teams and getting active in that scene. He transferred to Winston-Salem Bible College to study theology and Christian education.

Rev. Spivey knew him before he committed his life to ministry. "I told him God gave you enough sense not to get in that car with a drunk man. It's not God's fault, it's your fault and if God wasn't in that car, then you wouldn't be alive," he said. "Now he can praise God that he has life, and God gave him a peace and a joy in the situation he was in so maybe he could help someone else in a bad situation."

Mr. Ward has a new life today. He has been married to Maria Ward for seven years. (Their couple is a tribute to his family's love. Carved in the cement are the phrases "The Ward Family" and "Maria loves Randy 96.")

He's self-sufficient, fishing, hunting, mowing his own grass and playing basketball for the Port City Spokesmen, the National Wheelchair Basketball Association's Division III champions. But none of those activities take precedence over his ministry. He doesn't do anything without consulting God first, especially singing. "I decided to go play for Port City as long as they let me put Jesus first in my life," he said. "I feel like now that I'm doing his work, I want to do the best I can."

"Do I have an irresistible voice? Don't think so. Do I have anything that's different from other musicians? Don't think so. But I tried to quit (singing) and the Lord wouldn't let me so I let him do this through me, and I'm his vessel."

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Randy Ward

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