

One wish before dying

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By Kay Luna

CLINTON, Iowa — Rick Ullrich's voice cracks with emotion as he describes his life's devotion to honoring Vietnam War veterans. He wants to make sure that his mission continues, even in death.

Doctors recently told the 56-year-old Clinton man he has only three or four months to live, after discovering that prostate cancer has spread into his bones.

After his death, he wants his cremated ashes to be sprinkled in a flower bed next to the Clinton County veterans' memorial. He spearheaded the drive in the mid-1980s for the memorial's construction on the Clinton County Courthouse lawn.

"I want to be a part of the memorial for eternity," he said, his words trailing off as he blinked back tears. "I just want my ashes to be as close to that memorial as I can."

Ullrich spoke to Clinton County Attorney Mike Wolf, and the three-member Clinton County Board of Supervisors will hear his request today when it meets at the Clinton County Administration Center.

Wolf said the request is unusual, but he plans to recommend that the board grant the dying man's wish. There are no laws against releasing cremated remains on county property, with permission, he said.

A resolution will be drafted and presented for possible action next week, the county attorney said.

"If and when he passes on, we'll have the paperwork for whoever is handling his affairs," Wolf said. "He's dealing with his death, and it's pretty sad. I don't see why the county couldn't accommodate him."

The 1965 Clinton High School graduate wanted to fight in the Vietnam War, but he failed the military's physical examination several times from 1965-68.

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He worked with Metropolitan Life in the insurance and financial service business for 25 years, but he never forgot the soldiers who served the country.

As a tribute, he founded the Clinton Area Vietnam Veterans' Association in 1985 and issued a plea for help creating a veterans' memorial for the county. The project was completed in 1987, and Ullrich describes the dedication ceremony as one of the most precious and memorable days of his life.

"I look at those names on the memorial, and I could have been one of them, if I didn't flunk my draft physical," he said. "I'm dying, but I've been allowed to live longer than they did. I'm grateful for what they did."

Ullrich later went on to create the International Missions for Humanity in 2001 to collect funds for humanitarian work in places like Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand.

He made many fact-finding trips in the past few years to those places and others in Central America and Jamaica. He was drawn to help children in orphanages, and hoped to expand his work to assist victims of land mines and AIDS.

His travels took him to Belize earlier this month. That's where he was Jan. 13 — fishing leisurely off an island — when he decided to call back to Iowa and check on results of a recent prostate exam.

The bad news brought him home right away.

"I'm dying," he said, sounding eerily matter-of-fact about the prognosis. "I was traveling and never took the time before to get this checked out. I ignored the symptoms, and you should never ignore symptoms."

Since he returned to Clinton, Ullrich has focused on his close friends and family and finalizing his own funeral arrangements. He wants everything in order if he dies soon.

"I was just going to let nature take its course, but now, I'm going to fight it," he said.

Ullrich said many of his Vietnam veteran friends and others made him promise he would seek aggressive cancer treatment, and he has an appointment to begin that

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process early this week.

“Maybe I’ll get lucky here, but if I don’t, I’ll plan ahead,” he said. “I have a buddy who’ll spread my ashes, and I don’t want him to run into any red tape.”

He expects to know by April if his cancer is in remission, or if the end is near. Until then, he hopes to continue “loving life” with the time he has left, he said.

“Even on a gray day, colors are more vivid,” he said. “Music lyrics from songs I listened to in the ’60s mean more now. Relationships mean a lot more than they did before. I’m at peace.”

If his final arrangements are approved by the county, the only other loose end in his life is that he hasn’t spoken to his daughter since April 6, 1992, when he and her mother divorced. He said he has yearned for contact with her over the years.

“I really miss her,” he said. “That’s my only regret.”

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