

Fletcher Gill

Giving Families Their Wings

When Fletcher Gill's father passed away, the news hit him like a punch in the stomach. For eight years, Fletcher had watched him battle a nervous system disorder. Some periods were harder than others and his father courageously, though precariously, managed to cling to his health. The periods of relative calm had given Fletcher a false sense of security during his constant work travels, so that stopping by to check on his father had not always been his top priority.

"I never got a chance to say goodbye, to reconcile differences, or to tell him that I loved him," he says today. "I remember making the commute from Tysons Corner, driving past the exit to his house and thinking to myself, 'I should pull over and see how he is.'" I knew he was struggling, but I was always too tired from work to go see him. Now, I'd give anything just for five more minutes with him."

The death of his father left Fletcher with an emptiness he could not fill, catapulting him into a determined search for peace over the next six years. After two job changes, a marriage, and a divorce, he found himself at a standstill, ready to start over but unsure which direction to set out in.

In November of 2007, Fletcher had lunch with his long-time friend, Sarah Wingfield, a Redskins cheerleader-ambassador. She told him about a party she had attended at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center several months before, where she had met Luke Shirley, a soldier who had lost an arm and a leg in an IED blast. The soldier was clearly struggling both physically and emotionally from trauma he received in battle, but his mother was with him, changing his bandages and doing her best to cheer him up. "Sarah was very moved watching the pair, but also very concerned to see how many of the other soldiers were alone, without the support of their friends and family," Fletcher explains. "It made us really

start to think about what could be done for these heroes, either by the government or by people like us. These soldiers are at a crucial stage of their recovery, and they need the support of their loved ones to find the will to carry on, so this conversation got the wheels really turning in my head."

Fletcher immediately realized that a leading cause of a family's absence at the bedside of a wounded soldier is the high price of airline tickets—a price that, if the family cannot afford it, can bring stress and sorrow to the entire family unit. "I slowly began to realize that I actually had the tools to create the nonprofit we were envisioning to address this problem," he recalls. "To set up a nonprofit that provided counseling would require licenses and insurance, but no one could stop me from buying someone a plane ticket. I'm a big believer in keeping things simple and doing them well. And I'm a big, big believer in bringing families together—it's one way I continue to honor my father today."

Over the following weeks, Fletcher took care of the necessary paperwork to launch the nonprofit, and in January of 2008, he and Sarah threw their first fundraising party. Within their first year, they raised \$32,000, which went towards start-up costs and supplying nineteen plane tickets. In 2009, they managed to raise \$100,000 to cover over a hundred tickets, and that success was repeated in 2010. "It took a little while to catch on because a lot of charities in DC start up for the wrong reasons and because potential donors can be naturally mistrusting. Many of them fall apart, so people were skeptical of us at first," he explains. "But before we knew it, we had gained the trust of a number of military hospitals, so requests for flights started pouring in—all of which we said yes to."

Unfortunately, however, the fledgling



organization's success garnered requests for flights that far exceeded its incoming donations, stretching the charity's assets dangerously thin. "I had to take a second mortgage out on my house to start the charity, and there was a point where our American Express balance was \$25,000," Fletcher recalls. "I began to really get nervous when the credit card company started calling us every day looking for our heads."

With that, Fletcher reached out to his network in D.C. in search of new ways to raise money. "In November of 2011, Lindsay Kin, the Executive Director of Luke's Wings, and I were invited for an interview on Fox News, which turned out to be a huge success," he says. "We had families we'd helped on the show, and by the time we left the studio, we'd raised over \$60,000." The interview had opened the floodgates to real exposure that brought in substantial donations, including funding from Warren Buffett and Arnold Schwarzenegger. That year, they increased their revenue to \$980,000 to supply 400 plane tickets, and in 2012, they managed to supply 636 flights.

Today, the nonprofit, which they appropriately named Luke's Wings, has raised over \$1 million and supplied over 1,400 flights, serving twelve military hospitals around the country, including those in D.C., Texas, Colorado, and Florida. They have recently expanded their services, including off-book flights to families of special operators and veterans in the Hospice Care Transportation Assistance Program, which flies families to a veteran's side when they are nearing their end of life. "This allows peace of mind for the veteran and for the family, so that no one has to be alone when they pass away," Fletcher explains. "It's a final salute to our greatest generation." In addition to end-of-life care, the program will also keep the charity busy in times of peace. "When we pulled out of Iraq, people tended to stop donating," he says. "But this program keeps people engaged, while also being self-sustaining. It has 700,000 members living in elderly care centers, all of whom are eager to donate to help their friends and loved ones."

Whether experiencing times of high or low donations, Fletcher keeps the charity's operating costs low to channel as much money as possible toward supplying flights. He has taken a part-time salary for the past four years, employing only two full-time workers and leaning heavily on the

passionate volunteers that make Luke's Wings' success possible. "We stretch every donation as far as we can, so there really isn't much left to go around," he says. "Even if we raised \$1 billion, we'd put the vast majority of it towards helping the families, because the number one thing I believe in running this charity is staying accountable to the people I serve."

Fletcher was born in Northwest D.C., where his family had established a substantial legacy. During World War II, his grandfather had been stationed in San Antonio, Texas with Dwight D. Eisenhower, with whom he became such close friends that the two ended up marrying each other's sister. After the war, Fletcher's grandparents divorced, and his grandmother moved to DC with her sons, including Fletcher's father, to join the Eisenhowers. "I've always loved learning about our genealogy," he says. "I take great pride in our WWII hospice program at Luke's Wings since I have a strong family presence in that era."

Growing up, Fletcher's father always looked up to his "Uncle Ike," so much so that he pursued a life-long career in politics, working first as Eisenhower's page and eventually for both the Nixon and Reagan administrations. When Fletcher was young, he spent many days at Republican National Committee meetings, sneaking food off the buffet tables while trying to stay out of trouble.

Although his father loved his work in politics, it was not always the most lucrative career, so he tried his hand in political consulting, another avenue by which he could serve the Republican Party. "So much of politics is volunteer-based, and in order to make money, you have to spend a lot of money first to get voted into the club," Fletcher explains. "It becomes all-consuming, and you start to obsess over it. There is so much drama and so much time poured in, but you get so little done. My father loved it, but I would just get too frustrated with it."

His mother, who hailed from Missouri, offered support in his father's consulting business but preferred staying home once the children were born. She often helped Fletcher and his siblings with their homework and was exceptionally nurturing, while his father was much more the disciplinarian. "He always pushed me to do more," he recalls. "It was never good enough for him, but I was okay with that because it kept me moving forward." As a result, Fletcher was always

involved in some sort of activity, whether it was football, Boy Scouts, or shooting.

Despite what had seemed like a harmonious marriage, his parents separated when he was fairly young. He attended a boarding school for eighth and ninth grade before switching to a different boarding school for tenth grade, but it turned out to be a bad fit, so after four months, he returned home to finish out the year at the Emerson Institute in the DuPont Circle area of Washington, D.C.. His father had enrolled him at the Institute for its accelerated classes in the hopes of keeping him on track to graduate in four years, but after tenth grade, they decided to send him to a local public school--Wilson High School.

Because D.C. was still riddled with crime in the early 90's, Wilson High School offered little in terms of educational rigor or support. "I remember being told by the high school guidance counselor that I would never amount to anything," he recalls. "I wondered what right he had to assume that about me, but I took it as a challenge. I just became more determined to prove how wrong he was."

His father understood his desire to leave Wilson High School, so he offered Fletcher the option of attending the New Mexico Military Institute. "My dad knew I had a lot of ambition and horse power, so while my grades might not have been the best, he knew I could handle military training," he recalls. "I think he was really surprised by how excited I was by that idea, so I packed my bags and they sent me off."

The Institute challenged Fletcher right off the bat. In order to receive rank and eligibility for Annapolis recruitment, he had to repeat his junior year of high school. Additionally, the first few months of training were unimaginably hard, employing the Annapolis strategy of completely breaking the midshipmen down. "They stripped you of your time and energy, and I constantly wondered how I could take another day of it," he recalls. "I worked through it, though, because I was determined to prove that guidance counselor wrong and earn my rank. After a few months, I found I actually loved it, because I think I really needed to be challenged in that way."

Unbeknownst to Fletcher during those initial grueling months, his father had been diagnosed with Guillain-Barré Syndrome, a nervous system disorder presumably picked up from a flu shot. His parents refrained from telling

him since they understood he was struggling enough, but his hometown girlfriend broke down and called him when his father was particularly sick in the hospital. "Her mother had recently died from cancer, so she thought I deserved to know," he recalls. "I was very upset by the news, but I decided that no matter what, I would finish that first year at the Institute so I could earn my rank. I knew that was what my father wanted all along, so I did it for him."

Thanks to his steadfast determination, Fletcher managed to finish the year, which culminated in a dramatic turn of events in which he rescued a college football player from a terrible car accident. "We were just about to leave for the summer, and a bunch of us went off post to find a party to celebrate all our hard work," he recalls. "As we were driving through the desert, we saw a truck full of college football players flip several times, and we immediately jumped out to help. Most of the passengers were unharmed, but one football player was stuck under the truck's cabin, and I was the first person to get to him. Even though he was twice my size, I somehow managed to pull him out from under the truck. I remember being really amazed afterwards that I hadn't hesitated to react—it showed me that if I'm really pushed, I can do anything, which was a great thing to learn so early in life."

When he finally returned home for the summer, Fletcher felt like a new man, having accomplished so much in such a short time. He had loved his time at the Institute, but felt too worried about his father to return, so he transferred to Churchill High School in Maryland, where he graduated a year later.

Fletcher then attended Penn State University, where he joined the Beta Theta Pi fraternity and immediately noticed the difference between the boys who were partying and the boys who were preparing for their future. "I had a moment where I realized I was the master of my own destiny, and I really didn't want to screw up college," he recalls. "I could eat pizza and drink beer every night, or I could really buckle down and make something of my college experience, which would be a huge favor to myself down the road." He decided to pursue a degree in accounting, planning to go on to become a CPA and earn an MBA in finance; however, after spending every college summer interning with Deloitte, he was offered a job leading into his

senior year, which he readily accepted.

As soon as he graduated, Fletcher returned home to Tysons Corner, Virginia, to work for Deloitte as an IT auditor. He spent the majority of the summer of 2001 traveling for his job, so he rarely saw his father, even though he lived just a few highway exits away from him. On September 8th, he returned from a particularly long trip and received the phone call from a neighbor that his father had passed away.

Even though Fletcher and his father had always had a strong relationship, he deeply regretted that they hadn't spent more time together, especially towards the end of his life. The next several years held further challenges that certainly tried his spirits, but ultimately, Fletcher found himself taking the right fork in the road at a character-defining moment. "I realized that I could sink into misery and hide in a bottle of alcohol, or I could get up and find new opportunities, so I chose the latter," he recalls.

He thus decided that 2007 would be the year he started over. He began eating better and exercising more, took up photography, reestablished himself in the D.C. social scene, and took the time to de-stress and explore what really mattered most to him. "By the end of the year, I realized I didn't want to do IT auditing anymore, so I left my job at Deloitte and earned my real estate license," he says. "I was washing my hands of everything and taking a new road, so when I had that lunch with Sarah, my mind was clear, open, and ready to take the idea of the charity and run with it."

In January of 2008, Fletcher began working with a small real estate company in downtown D.C., filed the C3 for Luke's Wings, and sold his BMW to help fund his dreams. "My savings carried me for 2008 and 2009, since my real estate job was suffering with the downturn in the economy, but all of those sacrifices paid off," he recalls. Now, five years later, he is engaged to Lindsay Kin and serves as the owner and managing partner of Genau Group Realty, a small team of five brokers who specialize in commercial

real estate.

Fletcher recently had the privilege of returning to the New Mexico Military Institute to deliver a graduation speech, where he encouraged the pursuit of one's passions while maintaining the safety net of always staying marketable. "No matter what you do, make sure you have a vocational skill so that you can wake up in the morning and know you're able to make a dollar," he says. "But with that, I truly believe you should devote your life, or at least a majority of your time, to a cause that moves you. That way it will never seem like work."

To remind himself of this very message, Fletcher wears the watch his father gave him as a college graduation present every day. "One of the hardest parts about losing my dad was not having the chance to say goodbye, which is why I feel so strongly about what we do at Luke's Wings," he says. "We give people that chance to say goodbye or offer the support to carry them through recovery. I know that if I sat down with my dad and my Uncle Ike, they would be so proud of the way we are honoring our country's heroes and bringing families together, and at the end of the day, that's what it's all about."

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