



1969 Cubs coach's voice found via both tape and blood center in his name

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Something about Verlon (Rube) Walker's drawling rural persona, his effect on those in his orbit and the good works that followed in his wake brought out the best even in the most questionable of people.

As then-Cubs pitching coach Walker lay dying at Wesley Memorial Hospital — now Northwestern Memorial Hospital — in the winter of 1971, who should show up but his amoral managerial boss, Leo Durocher, one of the most despised men in baseball who would emulate *The Caine Mutiny's* Captain Queeg in pushing his Cubs into a state of rebellion later in the '71 season.

“Leo came to see him in the hospital when he was sick,” recalled Walker's daughter, Leigh-Ann Young. “He gave my mother (Ann) a book. It was a love-poem book. It was (dedicated) in there from Leo and his wife (Lynne) at the time. Leo really did like my dad. (Coach) Joey Amalfitano said that, too.

“P.K. Wrigley really liked him. I know this for sure. P.K. said when he hired Leo, he will keep Rube Walker. He grew to really like him.”

Young' story about Durocher's behind-the-scenes kindness to Walker was a suitable oral-history foundation for another stop on the journey she has undertaken to get to know her father, who died of leukemia at Northwestern Memorial when she was just 3. Walker, flying up from her Charlotte, N.C. home, was taking a breather from a whirlwind weekend visiting The Rube Walker Blood Center at Northwestern, named in her



Leigh-Ann Young went 360 degrees in her journey about her father when she hugged Pat Hughes in the radio broadcast booth at Wrigley Field. Hughes started her on the journey to find a recording of Verlon Walker's voice.



Leigh-Ann Young got to visit her father's old workplaces, including the Wrigley Field home dugout and the third-base coach's box.

father's honor after the likes of Ernie Banks – with her father start to finish in his Cubs days – helped spearhead its establishment in the 1970s.

Growing up, Young had some accounts of her father's life from her mother, other family members and friends along with a treasure-trove of photos of his life as a 10-season Cubs coach. Several photos are absolutely stunning of her dad holding her infant self at Wrigley Field or showing her around the Cubs' locker room. But his premature death at 42 left a gaping hole in her life she never could quite fill up.

Despite the personal photo and film archives, Young never had heard a recording of her father's voice, distinctive in the dialect of the foothills of North Carolina in his hometown of Lenoir, where a pretty fair southpaw pitcher, Madison Bumgarner, also keeps his off-season crib. Of course, she was too young to remember Verlon Walker speaking.

Pat Hughes started Leigh-Ann on journey

Young started out contacting Cubs radio play-by-play announcer Pat Hughes for assistance. Hughes did not know of any recordings. But, in turn, Hughes referred Young to this writer, possessor of a couple of thousand hours of vintage baseball audio and video clips used on the syndicated *Diamond Gems* radio show from 1994 to 2010 and the Chicago Baseball Museum's web site.

Unfortunately, no tape of a *Leadoff Man* radio or TV show – the most likely source of a Walker interview – conducted by Lou Boudreau, Vince Lloyd or Lloyd Pettit existed. The search seemed to be for a needle in the cosmic haystack. Knowing how difficult

Young's quest was proving, this writer on behalf the CBM put Young in touch with a slew of Cubs players and coaches from her father's era, including Hall of Famers Billy Williams and Fergie Jenkins. Young instead heard her father's voice through the men with whom he positively interacted, and was almost able to re-construct a three-dimensional image of Verlon Walker. ESPN's Keith Olbermann and other media chronicled Young's quest. Young blogged about her journey at baseballlovestory.com.

The journey took a Rod Serling-style twist last spring when a 90-second tape of Verlon Walker was discovered. Of course, many times the precious material we want is right under our noses. A tape of Walker introducing New York Yankees star Bobby Richardson at the family church in Lenoir had been made in 1966, as part of a live radio broadcast of the Sunday morning service.

The church's pastor had given the tape to Ann Walker, who stored it away with other mementoes. Somehow the tape was forgotten until Young's recent quest, and memories of it were stirred. Olbermann devoted the first six minutes of one of his last ESPN shows to the discovery and Young's continued journey. Young has constructed a book proposal that combines baseball, the concept of loss and fathers' relationships to daughters that should appeal to both fans and non-fans alike.

But the entire process hardly ended with the tape's appearance. Young continues to build the image of her father, who appeared to her in several timely dreams that, spiritually, could be something more. The journey took her to Chicago, Northwestern Memorial and Wrigley Field. She was given a tour of the blood center that has saved lives in her father's name and hugged Hughes – the man who jump-started her quest – in the radio broadcast booth at the ballpark.

Double 'cheezeborger' at Billy Goat's

Young also re-traced her father's steps, sitting in the dugout and walking out to the third-base coaching line. She also walked outside the Wrigley Building, from where P.K. Wrigley ensured her father's employment, and got a real taste of Chicago via a double "cheezeborger" at the Billy Goat Tavern, home of the city's most famous sports curse.

The most significant contribution of Verlon Walker's life might not have been the sage counsel to young Cubs. He was so well-liked both top Cubs management and the players worked actively to establish the Rube Walker Leukemia Center, later expanded in name and scope to treat a variety of blood diseases. A series of fund-raisers with Chicago sports and media celebrities beyond baseball fully capitalized the center. Olbermann's on-air essay about the Walker tape prompted MLB.com to dispatch a camera crew to follow Young around the blood center in Chicago's Streeterville neighborhood and its South Side archives. The blood center not only hosted Young's visit, but also arranged for tickets to the next day's Cubs game. As if they were playing in Young's and Walker's honor, the Cubs rallied from a 7-3 deficit to beat the Braves 9-7.

In keeping with her father's special gift, the narrative was not about facilities, but of people.



(Left) Leigh-Ann Young enjoyed the warm welcome of the Billy Goat Tavern and a double "cheezeburger" prepped by grill man Mario Gonzalez, shown here with Young. The Billy Goat curse originated on besotted nights with regular customers Mike Royko and David Condon in this bar. (Right) Young in front of the Wrigley Building, from where Cubs owner P.K. Wrigley mandated father Verlon Walker remain a Cubs coach when Leo Durocher took over as manager.

“Seeing his name on the door, seeing a picture of him in the lobby was wonderful,” Young said. “But I actually got to speak with a patient. I sat with her while she got her treatment in a machine called the centrifuge/apheresis, which is blood-center treatment that was radically changed by the donations and the beginning of the center.

“This woman was blissed out to meet me because I’m the daughter of the man whose name started this. She felt lucky she lived in a place where she had access to this treatment. She wanted to thank the Cubs for starting this. It was the kindness of my father that endured that made the Cubs and the people want to do something special for me, in his honor. Fort-five years later, it’s still helping people heal, saving people’s lives. That was breathtaking.”

The blood center is not an expansive facility. Young described a small waiting room and six or seven exam rooms in which patients take hours-long treatments.

Blood center treats thousands

“They said they used to treat 400, now they treat in the thousands,” she said. “My father was before his time. He could have been saved by this treatment, possibly. I like the fact it’s a small, intimate place. It was like my dad, gentlemanly and kind. It wasn’t sterile. It was a nice place. And it had a great energy about it.

“He would be so proud of what has come of it. He was just a simple guy from baseball. He would have loved what this has become. It’s still so new, I’ve got to process this every bit. It makes it real. It’s like him.

“He’s been a ghost almost all my life. To see this, it makes one more level of reality for me. It solidifies his legacy. It just brings me closer to the fact that the only thing that



(Left photo) Leigh-Ann Young and dad Verlon Walker at Wrigley Field circa 1969. (Right photo) Verlon Walker (at left) in spring training circa 1962 with fellow coach Vedic Himsl (center) and a very young Lou Brock (right).

remains is your kindness. When you leave, people only remember how kind you were. All this has unfolded because he was kind and he was good to young players, he was a team player and they felt compelled to start this.”

Young’s photo file of her father includes many shots of him posing with the game’s big names at Wrigley Field. All are in a great mood.

“He must have just made people feel at home and comfortable,” she said. “He must have been like a magnet and have people drawn to him. I have a lot of pictures of people smiling, and I would love to know what Sandy Koufax thought of him and how Frank Robinson felt about him.”

Young attempted to contact Koufax through ex-Cub Phil Regan, who got his nickname “The Vulture” by going 14-1 in relief for the Dodgers in Koufax’s final season in 1966. She’s confident once she can speak to the immortal lefty, he’ll have some great stories to further build up the portrait of Verlon Walker.

And Young had a good report on Chicago to spread around Charlotte in her first visit as an adult.

“It’s a beautiful city,” she said. “It’s clean. People are incredibly generous, nice and kind. It’s not an intimidating city. I know the traffic is bad. You got beautiful architecture. I know it’s big, but everybody here I’ve met has been so kind and open and helpful.”

There’s one exception.

“I could not survive a winter here,” Young said.

The Rube Walker Blood Center, though, survives and prospers no matter what the season, 100 degrees or 15-below, no small thanks to the man who touched so many in life and far beyond.

“He must have meant a lot,” concluded Young. “He must have touched a lot of people in a lot of small ways, just lending a hand or an ear, or a piece of wisdom for each person to want to come together like that.”