Mr. Gunn’s Legacy: Do the Right Thing, and Do Things Right

By Valerie Hunt

He kept meticulous records of the association’s early days, always written longhand, in pencil. He held strong opinions, commanded respect and quietly, constantly — so subtly many people never knew it — lifted those around him by offering shelter in life’s storms (a few dollars here, a few hours of work there, well-timed words of encouragement).

People who met Bobby Gunn even once knew what he stood for: doing the right thing, and doing things right. Thus is the professional legacy of the man who became NATA’s first elected president.

He died March 1, 2007, a few weeks shy of his 83rd birthday.

Genesis of a Leader

Bobby Gunn was born in Texas, on April 27, 1924. Smart as a whip and with a sharply inquisitive mind, he excelled in school but became best known as a standout athlete. At home, he worked hard, served his family, nurtured the religious faith instilled by his parents and harbored dreams of being a doctor.

But before he reached high school, Bobby lost his mother.

Before he turned 20, Sgt. Gunn stood shoulder to shoulder with fellow Marines during one of the century’s most harrowing military campaigns: the Battle of Guadalcanal.

He grew up fast, learned to persevere and never shrunk from a challenge. He was John Wayne without the boastful swagger.

“He was straightforward and honest and always chose to do what he thought was the right thing. In all the 56 years we were married I never saw him deviate from that,” said Jane Gunn, who met her future husband while he was a student at Rice University, after the war. “He never cut a corner. He did his best every time, every minute.”

“I spent a lifetime with him, and I never once saw him give less than that,” Mrs. Gunn added. “I not only loved him, but I admired him a lot.”

In the wake of his passing, people from all walks of life are turning up to say the same thing. Even though he maintained an intensely private struggle with cancer, the family’s phone started ringing within an hour of Mr. Gunn’s death. It still hasn’t stopped.

Former athletes who got treatment as long ago as the 1960s feel compelled to pay tribute. Colleagues have been moved to tears, even though he worked with them 20 years ago.

His life changed others’. It was the one goal he always pursued but never realized he had achieved.

Service to the Profession

At NATA’s inaugural meeting in Kansas City in 1950, Bobby Gunn’s name was on the roster. A last-minute crisis prevented his attendance, but not his involvement. As a student of Frank Medina and Eddie Wojcik, he knew service was not optional if his chosen profession was to thrive.

“The history of our association will show that he was a very valuable, important person in our maturation as a profession,” said former NATA President Denny Miller, PT, ATC. “We owe a lot to him, and certainly as one of the presidents, I do. He knew what he was talking about, and he was available with a quick phone call. That’s invaluable.”

"President Gunn was many things to many people: he was an American hero, he was a leader, and he was a friend. His wisdom and his wit will be missed.”
— NATA President #6 Kent Faib, ATC

"He used to work with kids in his PE class who had some physical and mental problems. He would take them fishing once a year, and he got the Home Ec class to cook whatever they caught. He took a lot of joy in making those kids happy.”
— Dr. Steve Taylor, local vet and workout buddy

"I’d describe him like an M&M’s: hard outer shell, but very soft inside, just a really good guy. Deep down, he sincerely cared about people and loved the NATA.”
— NATA President #10 Chuck Kimmel, ATC
A founding officer of SWATA in 1955, Mr. Gunn became the district director in 1963. From 1965-69, he served on the NATA Board of Directors, the last two years as chair.

During this time, NATA was bursting at the seams. Certification, and consequently education, came to the forefront. Jobs, salaries, respect, government oversight, the very name and definition of athletic training; all these issues began to heat up. Simultaneously, the association was trying to clarify who would do what, under which authority.

Former NATA President Bill Chambers, ATC, led a committee to reorganize the administration and governance of NATA. A top priority: install a president elected by members instead of a chair appointed by the board.

Bobby Gunn was the first person elected (and re-elected), serving as president from 1970-74.

“He was the right one to lead us at the right time,” Chambers recalled. “He loved helping people, whether it was an athlete or a coach or an association or a student. But [if Bobby] didn’t agree with you on something he’d flat tell you. He loved NATA to a passion, and so he was very vocal about what he thought.”

His characteristic frankness never filtered, which made his voice a valuable one, said current NATA President Chuck Kimmel, ATC.

“He was willing to speak his mind, and he still cared enough about the NATA that he was willing to express his opinion,” Kimmel said. “Bobby set the standard for being an NATA president.”

_service to health care_

While he was helping both NATA and SWATA grow (he played a key role in making Texas the first state with licensure), Mr. Gunn was dedicated to keeping people healthy. His career encompasses almost every setting now in existence.

His work includes:
- Rice Institute, 1947-50;
- Brazosport High School, 1950-57, one of only two schools in Texas then to use an athletic trainer;
- Robert E. Lee High in Baytown, 1957-62, where he became a direct mentor for two future NATA presidents;
- Lamar Tech (now Lamar University), 1962-71, where he established one of the first athletic training curricula in the country;
- One year with the Washington Redskins, followed by many with the Houston Oilers.

Mr. Gunn also sold medical equipment, worked in various clinics and hospital outreach programs and returned to the high school setting after he “retired.”

Former NATA President Bobby Barton, EdD, ATC, calls Mr. Gunn a visionary.

“He was way ahead of his time in many ways,” said Barton, who sprained his thumb as a seventh-grade athlete in Baytown and was welcomed into Mr. Gunn’s athletic training room for treatment. “He developed a preventive fitness program for the luggage handlers at the old Houston airport in the late 1950s. At that time, the biggest oil refinery in the world was in Baytown, and many of their preliminary fitness and emergency plans were developed by Bobby Gunn.

“He was a catalyst,” Barton added. “Everywhere he’s been, he’s had the same positive impact on the community and the profession that he had in Baytown.”

The Washington Redskins’ Bubba Tyer, AT Ret., said Mr. Gunn’s respect for others made him a favorite among players. In turn, he demanded respect for himself and his profession.

“Athletic training was his chosen profession, and you didn’t slight it, or you’d hear from him,” said Tyer, who was a Lamar student under Mr. Gunn and later became his assistant with the Redskins. “We all called him Mr. Gunn. He was not ’Coach,’ he definitely was not ’Bobby.’ He was Mr. Gunn.

“Because he demanded that respect for himself, he made it easy to be very proud to be an athletic trainer.”

As vocal as he was in promoting his profession, Mr. Gunn was equally quiet about his personal contributions. And they were big.

Bobby Gunn defied racial barriers by opening his athletic training room early and late every day to care for athletes from Baytown’s black high school during the height of segregation. He arranged special outings for physically and mentally disabled students. He withstood pressure and criticism from powerful coaches and team owners in order to protect his injured players.

It was, he felt, the right thing to do.

_family: the heart of it all_

With contributions on the level Mr. Gunn gave, it was easy to define him as an athletic trainer or a professional leader. But he always was—and remained—a family man first.

Bobby and Jane Gunn married in 1950, had the same graciousness, com-

“He got things done by being strong and standing up for the rights of athletic trainers. I remember one episode where we met some young athletic trainer, and the kid said, ‘Well, I’m just the trainer.’ Bobby corrected him immediately and told him, ‘It’s not just anything. Be proud. Stand tall, and recognize what an important role you play.’”

— Bubba Tyer, AT Ret., former student

“He was kind of a silly Goat Gruff on the outside, but he was Winnie the Pooh on the inside. He cared enough to always say what he thought, even if it meant a little confrontation. He was my hero.”

— NATA President #5 Jerry Rhea, AT Ret.

“I never went anywhere with him that somebody didn’t come up and talk to him. He was just really a stand-up guy. We had breakfast at the Avalon Diner every Wednesday—he loved waffles—and the waitresses there cried when he died. We’re all bigger for having known him.”

— Bill Bronsell Jr., workout buddy
passionate spirit and love of learning. Both were strong, but where he was intense, she is lighter hearted. While she cooked traditional family meals – most every night – he did the dishes. They loved each other, had fun together and were lavishly proud of their four children: Kathy, David, Mary Ellen and Robert.

“He spent his whole life trying to make athletic training a respected and accepted and needed profession,” Mrs. Gunn said. “I doubt he ever said no when someone asked him to do something. But really, family is what mattered. He was a wonderful father and a wonderful husband.”

In speaking to his three surviving children – David died in 1989 – Mr. Gunn’s legacy as a father becomes apparent. He related to each child personally, met them on their turf. Yet each gleaned the same basic lessons: do your best, do the right thing, always be genuine.

Kathy, a teacher like her father, remembers more of his early days in athletic training. Esteemed as Mr. Gunn became, his children saw not one hint of ego.

“We didn’t realize he was such a giant,” Kathy said. “He never made a big deal out of anything he did. We knew he always wanted to do things right, and he expected the same thing of us. But he was fair and firm and honest.”

Mary Ellen inherited his power of quiet observation. She treasures the peaceful, private conversations during which he got to know what mattered to her, and vice versa.

“He showed us that if something was worth doing, then it was worth doing your best – and no matter what that was, he would be proud of us,” Mary Ellen said. “It always felt like quite an accomplishment when we made him proud, because we knew he meant it. He believed, and taught us to believe, that if you had a true gift and were true to it, then you didn’t have to brag about it; other people would know.”

Being true to his own character often left Mr. Gunn conflicted, according to Rob, the youngest and the one the family pegs as most similar to his father.

“He would lament being what he called a hard-ass,” Rob explained. “He told me, ‘You and I are a lot the same, and that’s going to give you some troubles in life, but don’t be afraid of it. Be who you are.’

“But he was harder on himself than on anybody else,” Rob added. “He just didn’t like persons; he could see right through them. He had a genuine respect for anyone at any time who had a true passion and did it to the best of their ability.

“He could spot that, and he could bring it out in people.”

Mr. Gunn loved music – he sang in several church choirs and danced to the post-war classics. His favorite foods were seafood, Chinese dishes and fish fried in steak. He had a direct manner and dry wit. He enjoyed fishing, crabbing, keeping up with sports, taking train trips with his wife, raising his dog Bobbie and doting on his grandchildren. (He helped his grandson Lee, a Marine, prepare for service in Iraq; he took equal care in helping granddaughter Bethany collect pennies as a child.)

There are a million other details and facts that describe Mr. Gunn. They all add up to one truth.

Bobby Gunn always did his best, and his best made the world around him better.

Mr. Gunn is survived by his wife, Jane; daughter Kathy Ratcliff and grandson Lee; daughter Mary Ellen Aiena, son-in-law Jody and grandchild Lane and Bethany; and son Robert Paul Gunn, daughter-in-law Ji Ji and infant grandson Noah. His son David preceded him in death.

“He hated apathy, just hated it. He couldn’t understand why people would want to get into a profession if they didn’t want to be involved. He stood head and shoulders above everybody.”

— NATA President #3 Bill Chambers, ATC

“Baytown, Texas, in the 1950s and ’60s was a completely segregated community. The athletes at the black school had practically no access to medical care. Bobby would get up very early and stay really late in the evenings so he could take care of them. There aren’t 20 people who know he even did that. He just thought it was the right thing to do, so he did it.”

— NATA President #4 Bobby Barton, EdD, ATC

“Bobby was a great guy with a gruff exterior, a soft heart and a sometimes wicked sense of humor. He called coaches ‘scratchers.’ I thought that was a hoot. Bobby loved and was proud of his family, and was devoted to his dog, Bobble, whom he fondly referred to as ‘He.’”

— NATA Executive Dir. Eve Becker-Doyle, CAE

**Tribute in Anaheim**

The NATA will honor President Bobby Gunn during the 58th Annual Meeting & Clinical Symposia.

— **Tribute to Bobby Gunn** takes place at 9:30 a.m. Friday, June 29, following the Student Leadership Breakfast. Members of the Gunn family will be on hand, and designated colleagues will speak.

— A **Bobby Gunn Memory Book** is being compiled for his family and will be available at the tribute. Send letters to Cami Leal at camil@nata.org or fax (214) 637-2206 by May 30.

— A **Bobby Gunn Video Tribute** will be shown during the Awards Luncheon on Friday, June 29.

— The **Bobby Gunn Student Leadership Award** will allow non-certified student members to enter an essay contest for a free trip to the NATA convention. (This annual award is for students who have never attended the convention. Entry details will be shared online when finalized.)

— A “Friends of Bobby Gunn” memorial contribution to NATAPAC allows members to send donations in his name. Access the donation form at www.natapac.org or contact Amy Callender at amyc@nata.org.