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Roanoke neighborhood remembers James Tarpley, the 'Angel of Grandin Road'

By Matt Chittum

She had the hood up in the Grandin Road 7-Eleven parking lot, adding some oil to her beater Honda Civic.

And he just appeared, offering help.

Anna Robertson was 18, James Tarpley was past 60. A friendship of 25 years began that day, one of many that sprang of Tarpley’s uncanny ability to materialize in a moment of need.

Today, Robertson is one of many grieving Tarpley’s passing over the weekend. Tarpley, 86, was found dead in his residence near Grandin Road on Tuesday after friends hadn’t seen him for a few days.

He was known to just about everyone around Roanoke’s Grandin Village, and to many beyond, as the neighborhood’s aging but ever-present good Samaritan — the “Angel of Grandin Road.”

Tarpley’s measure of local fame sprang not from controversy or even a desire for attention, but from sheer goodwill — an endless resume of kindnesses delivered without asking, and with no recompense sought.

And seemingly always just when they were needed.

Over the decades since he became a fixture in Grandin Village, he’s been lauded in the newspaper, twice depicted in prominent murals, commended by the police for chasing down a robber and enshrined as the city’s 2018 Citizen of the Year.

Yet to many, despite years of constant presence and tireless work to keep the village tidy, Tarpley was for a long time shrouded in flannel and mystery.

He grew up in Pittsylvania County, the grandchild of slaves owned by the family that owned the farm where he grew up. It was an uncommonly equitable relationship, Tarpley told The Roanoke Times in 2002. His family and the white family were exceedingly close, and when the landowners died off, they bequeathed 150 acres of land to Tarpley’s parents.

While his siblings went off to college, Tarpley stayed in Pittsylvania County caring for his parents until they died. He left only to join the Navy and serve in the Korean War.

Tarpley came to Roanoke in the mid-1980s. Susan Lipes, who owns the Grandin Road 7-Eleven store, met Tarpley when she managed a different 7-Eleven, on Brambleton Avenue. When she moved to the Grandin Road store, he showed up there, always ready to help.

He would sweep the parking lot and keep a watchful eye on the women who worked in the store, especially when they were alone on the night shift.

“He wouldn’t take money” for the work he did, Lipes said. And if he did, he wouldn’t name the price. “He would say, whatever you think it’s worth.”

Robertson later worked at that store, and the friendship that germinated with his offer of help years earlier bloomed as he hung around the store keeping her company.

When Robertson told Tarpley she had an idea to open an ice cream shop in the village, but needed a spot, Tarpley told to her to hold on and left. He came back a little later and told her about the old Raleigh Court Civic League building that might soon be available.

And that’s where Pop’s Ice Cream and Soda Bar soon opened. Tarpley was the first customer. He paid with a $2 bill.

Linda Steadman, owner of Too Many Books in the village, didn’t know Tarpley when she moved her store there 20 years ago. As she unpacked boxes and put the empties on the curb, they would mysteriously disappear.

It turned out Tarpley was taking them to the local recycling center. The two became friends and he eventually moved into the basement of the bookstore. It wasn’t a legal residence, but Tarpley kept it neat as a pin and stocked with his tools, Steadman said.

Steadman, Lipes and Robertson were among a cadre of Tarpley’s caretakers and closest friends. He once had business cards that identified him as the Angel of Grandin Road and for contact information, listed neighborhood businesses as places to find him.

“I would get his mail and 7-Eleven was his bank,” Steadman said.

If he had money, he usually gave it away. He had a yearslong stretch of luck buying winning lottery scratch tickets, which he carried in a stack like currency. He would buy things people needed and deliver them without asking.

Lipes recalled he delivered gallons of milk daily to one Raleigh Court family that had triplets. When the three boys lacked a grandfather to take to a school event, they took Tarpley instead.

He spent long hours sitting in Lipes’ office at 7-Eleven telling her about his childhood on the farm or his time in the war.

If Steadman had a book of pictures from the Korean War, he would pore over it.

Steadman said their conversations often turned to race. As a black man, he was completely comfortable in his mostly white surroundings in Raleigh Court.

“He was a big advocate for all of us being on equal,” Steadman said.

He wasn’t religious in a conventional sense, she said, but he had a personal code that was mostly about treating others as he wanted to be treated.

“If you were flawed, it didn’t matter,” Steadman said.

In 2004, developer Ed Walker, one of Tarpley’s regular patrons, bought a vacant lot on Memorial Avenue near the village, named it for Tarpley and made Tarpley its proud caretaker.

The old man never seemed to slow until 2008 when he became seriously ill. Lipes said he plopped down in a chair in her office and wouldn’t move for two days. Steadman and Walker finally got him to the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Salem and tracked down papers he needed to qualify for treatment — and which ultimately unlocked VA benefits he’d not been receiving.

Tarpley was in the hospital for days but never told what his ailment was and never went back.

After that, he slowed his pace. He brought an old office chair into the 7-Eleven and asked Lipes if he could leave it there to sit in. He just couldn’t stay on his feet like he used to, Lipes said.

Robertson often fed him at Pop’s. His favorite was a vegan, gluten-free okra soup — which he punched up with bread heels and butter.

Wednesday, the usually cheerful village was in a somber mood as it grieved Tarpley’s passing.

Pop’s was closed but Robertson opened the door to welcome anyone who wanted to reminisce about Tarpley and eat some of his favorite soup. That $2 bill he paid with 14 years ago is still in the cash register.

A few weeks ago, muralist Toobz Muir painted a life-size portrait of Tarpley on the corner of a building in the village. Wednesday and Thursday, Tarpley’s friends turned it into a makeshift memorial to him, leaving flowers, angel dolls and notes.

“In loving remembery of James” said one note in a child’s hand taped to a plastic cup of hand-picked flowers stuck in dirt.

“You’ve earned your wings,” said another note.

The mural, like Tarpley, turned up just when it was needed.