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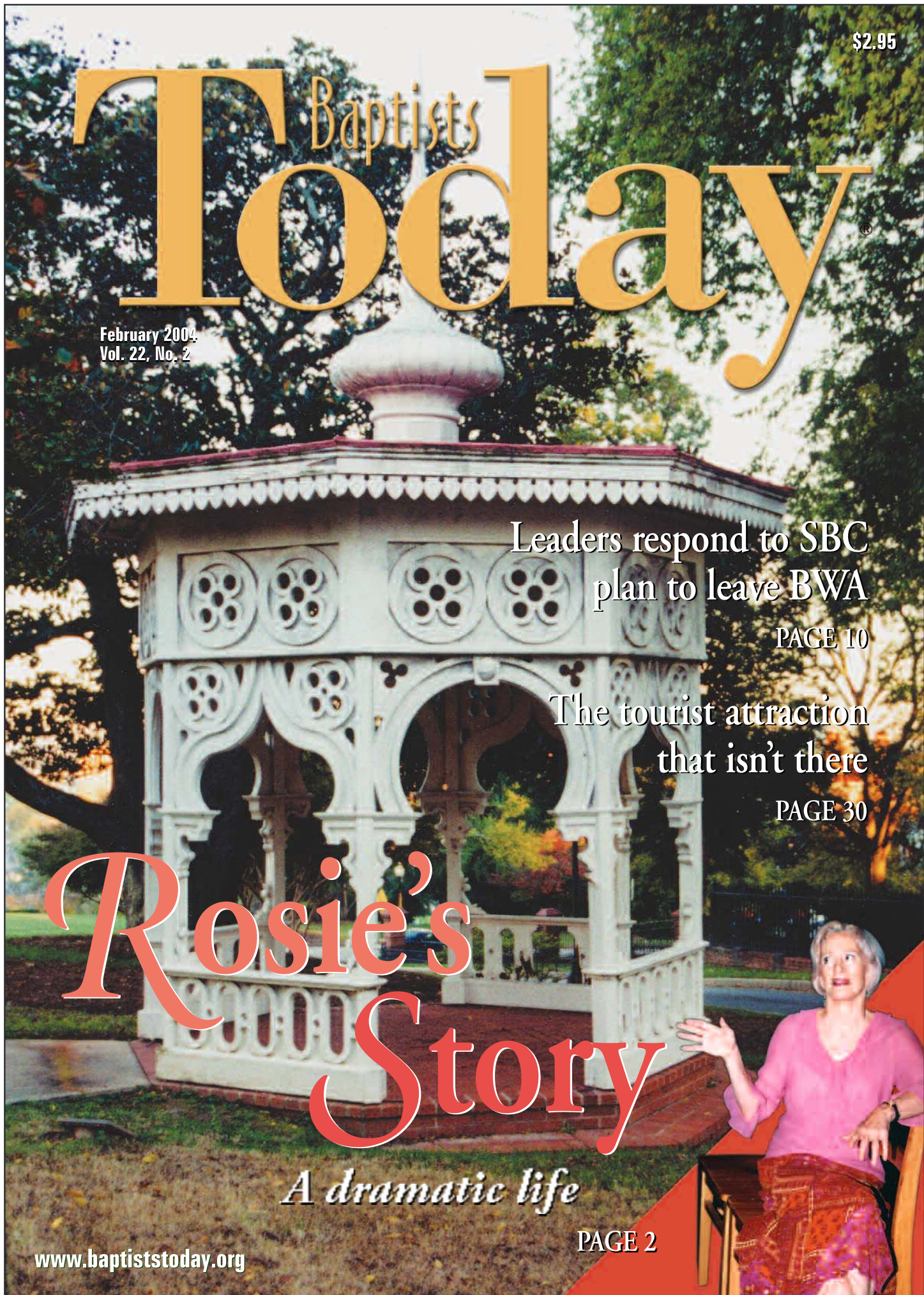
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Rosie's Story



Pastor-turned-playwright keeps ailing wife's dramatic life from disappearing

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. — As Richard Groves completes his day of pastoral duties at the university-based Wake Forest Baptist Church, he anticipates dinner with his wife. His experience, however, is not as typical as it sounds.

He makes the familiar three-mile drive to an assisted living facility with a special unit for patients with memory loss. While most of the residents are quite elderly, Rosemary Groves is just 60 — and has suffered from Alzheimer's disease for 14 years.

She cannot speak, walk or recognize the one who faithfully spoons her evening meal into her mouth. Her blank stare gives little evidence of the once-vibrant woman who overcame an abusive childhood, married a Baptist preacher, nurtured three bright children and then earned two advanced degrees from Harvard University.

A journey back

In the spring of 1990, just before her early-onset Alzheimer's was diagnosed, Rosie — as she is fondly called — made an unforgettable journey back to South Louisiana for the funeral of an aunt. However, the main objective was to visit her childhood home and put some demons to rest that she associated with her debilitating battle with depression.

Dysfunction does not begin to describe her early life with nine siblings, a beaten-down father and a domineering and destructive mother who ruled all their lives. But going back to the source of her challeng-

ing childhood — one that she finally escaped at age 14 — was compelling for a woman who had moved on to create a loving family and reach academic excellence but could never put the memories of her past behind her.

Her hopes of walking through the old home place again and confronting haunting memories were dashed, however. From a familiar sidewalk, she saw nothing else she recalled.

"Where once there had been a house with no grass, there was grass with no house," she wrote in the final chapter of *Ethel's Girl: Recollections of a Cajun Childhood* (The Hummingbird Press, 1992).

She broke down in sorrow at the sight of the vacant lot. But eventually her tears became "mercy drops" and Rosie had a significant experience of grace.

More to tell

Rosemary Groves' life reads like a book. Stories from her Cajun-Catholic upbringing are vivid, earthy, intriguing and, at times, nearly unbelievable. Beyond the pages of her book, however, are many more remarkable stories of what has transpired since her childhood — from the peaks of family joys and academic excellence to the valleys of depression and devastating illnesses.

Rosie can no longer tell her dramatic story. She has been left silent and nearly motionless.

"First the sparkle disappears from her eyes," Richard explained, "then the recognition."

"Then everything," he added, "like lights being turned off in the house across the street, one by one, until finally the house is dark."

In a sense, explained Richard, that is the point at which you are finally glad, because you realize the suffering is over.

"If the price you have to pay is a puzzled expression on her face when she looks at you, you pay it gladly."

The real tragedy of Alzheimer's is that people seem to slowly disappear, said Richard. And he is not ready for his wife to be forgotten.

On stage

A theater buff, Richard reads plays regularly and tries to catch a production about once a month. So his attention was piqued when a friend who teaches drama suggested he write a play about Rosie's life.

"There's nothing about Alzheimer's in it," said the preacher-turned-playwright, noting that the major themes are mental illness, abuse and a woman dealing with her mother.

Richard said he fictionalized the play, naming the character "Dottie." But everyone knows the play is about Rosie.

After overcoming several obstacles, the one-woman show featuring professional actress and licensed counselor Kirtan Coan ran for three days in the Ring Theater at Wake Forest University last August. The play was titled *Flight to Bertrandville* and began where Rosie's book ended — with her trip back to South Louisiana to see the old home place.

Richard admits being a very private person who was hesitant about bringing his personal pain into the public arena. But the response to the play confirmed that he had done the right thing.

After each performance, Richard — along with the actress and director John Gulley — would dialogue with the audience.

Richard said the sessions provided helpful critique for tightening the script as well as evidence that Rosie's story resonates with others.

"Thanks for bringing the old Rosie back," one longtime friend told him. But the responses that caught Richard by surprise came from women who had experienced mental illness or sexual abuse themselves, he said.

Richard admits he is still uncomfortable with his personal life getting public exposure. But he considers it to be constructive.

"Writing the book was very therapeutic for Rosie," he said. "Writing the play was very therapeutic for me."

The spotlight will come on again this year when *Flight to Bertrandville* hits the stage at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where Richard earned his doctorate.

Good memories

Richard's play is not the only way he keeps Rosie's remarkable life from disappearing. There are many memories that bring him laughter and tears. The stories flow easily.

- She once bought a bright green T-shirt for a dime at a yard sale. She assumed the price was low because it had the name "WANDA" emblazoned on the back. "No, my name is Rosie," she would often tell people while wearing the shirt, and then brag about the great deal she had found.

- When Mike Ford, son of Gerald and Betty Ford, was their next-door neighbor in Winston-Salem, Rosie once surmised that an occupied station wagon out front probably held Secret Service agents accompanying the former president on an occasional visit.

Richard recalled the humorous incident: "She tapped on the driver's side window and asked, 'Are you the Secret Service?' The startled man in overalls replied, 'No, we are the painters.'"

- Curiosity led Rosie and a friend to visit Heritage Village near Charlotte during the heyday of televangelists Jim and Tammy Bakker. She said of the place upon returning, "It's decorated the way poor people think rich people live."

- At Harvard, where she earned masters and doctoral degrees, Rosie was a colleague

and friend of noted theologian Henri Nouwen. Because of her Catholic upbringing, they connected well.

Nouwen's public lectures at Harvard drew large crowds including busloads of nuns. Because of his popularity, he complained to Rosie once that his staff mailbox was too small to accommodate the daily volume of mail he received.

Rosie suggested a large cardboard box from the grocery store could handle the overflow. He asked her to get one for him.

"Henri," she said, "I'm not one of your nuns. Get your own box."

Richard said Rosie's response went through the divinity school at the speed of light and became a part of her legend there.

"Rosie had the remarkable ability to be totally honest with people without making enemies," said Richard. And it proved true with her good friend Henri Nouwen.

"Truth be told, it wasn't always easy to be married to Rosie," Richard added. "She was the most honest person I've ever known ... and she expected everyone else around her to be equally honest."

A sixth sense

Rosie believed that people who suffer deeply have a way of finding others who are in pain and ministering to them. Richard believes that as well after seeing Rosie approach a stranger in the mall and speak words of comfort.

"I couldn't hear what they were saying, but I saw the woman begin to weep and Rosie take her in her arms," he recalled. Afterward, Rosie explained to Richard that she had simply seen a familiar look in her eyes and said, "I'm so sorry."

Of course, Richard added, talking to strangers always came easy to Rosie, who once invited a door-to-door Bible salesman into their house with the assurance she would not be buying anything but would be glad to talk awhile.

Richard recalled hearing singer Roseanne Cash recount a time when June Carter Cash was carrying on an animated phone conversation for nearly 30 minutes in another room of their house.

When she hung up, Roseanne asked, "Who was that?" June replied, "Wrong number."

Rosie was like that, said Richard.

A tested faith

Richard said he is often asked how he handles the burden of caring for a wife who no longer recognizes him — "as if I were privy to some

great secret."

"I usually have an answer, but hardly a secret," he confessed. "I tell them about human frailty and divine grace."

And he sometimes quotes to others — and often to himself — these words from William Barclay's commentary on Matthew:

"We are still alive, and our heads are still above water. Yet if someone had told us that we would have to go through what we have actually gone through, we would have said it was impossible. The lesson of life is that somehow we have been enabled to do the undoable and bear the unbearable and to pass the breaking point and not to break."

He expresses deep appreciation for faithful church members and other friends who have provided financial, emotional and spiritual help in caring for his family. And he sees ways his own pain has enabled him to minister to others in their darkest hours.

But the burden is still heavy, he acknowledged.

"When you're in the middle of all of this, you're not too reflective. You're just trying to put one foot in front of the other. You keep going — what is the option?"

"Yet I'm much more deeply convinced that God's spirit is working in unfathomable ways. A lot of it is just day to day, get up and do what has to be done. But I've become much more convinced of the mysterious presence of God." **BT**



Richard and Rosie Groves, just before her Alzheimer's was diagnosed in 1990.