

IN MEMORIAM

A toast to Hollywood, a legend and a legacy

PHOTOS / COURTESY LORRE ALLEN AND ALEX ESHELBRENNER '04



AT WORK Walker mops the floor of the cafeteria, making sure it's clean so that the next day can go smoothly.



ALL THE LOVE Hollywood, in the hospital, holds a tray signed by members of the community, given to him by Alex Eshelbrenner '04.



BROTHERS, FOREVER Walker (right) poses with colleague and friend of nearly forty years Chef Howard Stewart (left). The bond between the two would last past Walker's retirement, up to his death.



NOT JUST WORK Hollywood saw the school as an opportunity to make connections with all those around him — the faculty, the staff, and the boys. Here, he sits with fellow staff member May Sykes.

Walker "Hollywood" Walker passed away April 3, 2023. The school was like a second home to him, and from 1975-2020, he faithfully served the school and its community, only retiring when he had both his legs amputated. We talked to those who knew him well, exploring both his past and his impact to the school.

STORY Dawson Yao, Linyang Lee, Matthew Hofmann

Steve Walker lay in his hospital bed, leaning his torso on a white pillow. In truth, it was his whole body leaning against that pillow. He had just lost his other leg, only a few months after having one of them amputated.

But he remained resilient. His smile glowed through his graying afro and wrinkling face.

Former English teacher Curtis Smith looked around the room. Different colored flowers and gifts covered the windowsill and shelf. He asked who the gifts were from.

Oh, Scott Jolly brought that. And that was from Howard Stewart and his wife.

And as they talked, the minutes flew by — one, two, 10, 30 — and soon they were saying their goodbyes. When Smith finally walked past the flowers and the gifts towards the wooden door, Walker stopped him.

Tell Howard I love him.

Smith found Howard, and told him.

And Walker could have said it of many other people.

Like Marietta Johnson, who helped him for weeks and weeks to get comfortable talking at the Spring Alumni dinner as he celebrated his fortieth year at the school.

Like equipment manager Coach Ron Turner, who brought him to the doctor in the first place.

Like the students, who made him an honored guest at the Marksmen Ball, picking him up in a limo and buying him his first tuxedo.

And he could have said it of the whole school community. The place he loved and was loved by. A place where he learned and passed on so much.

More and more people opened that same door throughout his stay in the hospital. All people he loved.

Alex Eshelbrenner '04 was one of those people who opened that door, walking into that room, with a big smile and a blue lunch tray for Hollywood.

A lunch tray that held the signatures of those who Hollywood loved.

A lunch tray that said, "We love you, Hollywood."

And when they took a picture, Hollywood held those very words. Right next to his heart.

Walker never failed to grace the school with his love.

Standing at a mountainous 6'2", Walker's build might have seemed threatening to some. But in reality, this couldn't be further from the truth.

Though his face looked tough, he perpetually wore an I'm-just-happy-to-be-here look. Underneath what seemed like a rough exterior was a true softie; someone who genuinely cared about his surroundings.

Walker hobbled around campus. Even though his shoes were dilapidated beyond repair, and even though the pain made it so that he could barely walk, and even though massive cuts that never healed lined his legs, Walker made sure to share a heartfelt smile.

Every. Single. Day.

His drive? The Marksmen. For Walker, there was no one

better than the Marksmen. They embodied the life he longed for, the life he never had, and the life he always wanted.

But even though they had what he so desperately wanted, he never lived downtrodden and depressed. Instead, he brought much-needed energy to each student.

After marching past the library and through the quad, following the commands of Doc Browning, the lower schoolers would set their eager eyes on the gym and hear a familiar voice.

How's it going, man!?

After running a mile in record pace under the watchful eyes of cross country coach John Turek, middle schoolers, exhausted and drenched in sweat, would walk into the cafeteria and hear a familiar voice.

What's good, man!?

And after a particularly hard math test or spanish exam, upper schoolers, still discussing answers over lunch, would set their empty plates down on the conveyor belt and see a familiar smile.

You got all your work done!?

For cafeteria workers, the joy and happiness he brought remained constant. The same words he greeted students with were shared among his coworkers and companions. Everyone, from Chef Howard to former food services workers May Sykes and Brenda Bell, was a benefactor of the extraordinary energy that radiated from Walker. Like a giant teddy bear, Walker made it his mission to make everyone's day.

I love you man, I love you.

But long before it all, there was only Walker.

From birth, it was like the world was against him. Everyday, Walker woke up and went solemnly to school. For many, a place to get excited. A place to form as many friends as possible. A place to have fun.

Walker didn't see it like that. For him, school was the place where he spent the day in the corner, only to be called names and ridiculed by everyone: teachers, staff and his supposed "peers." They made it a living hell.

At home, at least the hell was better. Instead of spending time getting yelled at by his supposed "mentors", he cared for his family. Whatever his household needed, he provided. Blankets? No problem. Clothes? Don't even have to ask. Hot water for a bath? Even if it meant a trip to the local store with five gallon pails, he would do it. After all, what was chopping wood and carrying water to him?

But the obstacles didn't stop there. Walker, raised in tattered rags and always on an empty stomach, didn't know the difference between an A and an E, and couldn't distinguish one word from another. Even though he worked his fingers to the bone, he still couldn't write his own name, which made him all the more susceptible to dangerous people. Always laughed at, always misunderstood, and always taken advantage of.

Married life wasn't much easier. But for years and years, Walker guided, helped, and carried his blind wife through life's challenges, and it wasn't just for the heck of it. Walker found pride in his work, knowing that he was always doing something to better his community.

Just because he didn't have a good life didn't mean other people couldn't. Just because his childhood was rough didn't mean other people had to live like him. Just because God made him suffer didn't mean his creation wasn't great.

And when Walker came to St. Mark's in 1975, his perspective on life didn't waver, but grew stronger.

Armed with a short-hair afro and a small, parted-pencil mustache, Walker ventured outside his small, East Dallas apartment to hitch a ride on the daily DART bus. Everyday, the yellow bus pulled up onto Stop 15 on Buckner Boulevard, and Walker would get on. From there, the vehicle slowly inched the 20 miles up to Forest and Preston, where he would get off and hobble the remaining two miles to St. Mark's.

And once he walked on to 10600, it might as well have been heaven.

For him, St. Mark's could not have been better. Complete with a chapel, theater, and dining hall, the school was his Garden of Eden. His sanctuary, his safe haven and his home away from home.

Everyday, Walker lived faithfully by the saying now popularized by interim Head of Upper School John Ashton, "Do the things, and do them well." Walker not only put his heart into his job of cleaning industrial sized pots and pans, but he put his soul into embracing and building relationships with his community.

Steve Walker Memorial Service

When
Saturday,
May 20 @ noon

Where
Dallas Bethlehem
Center
4410 Leland Avenue,
Dallas

And he loved to talk — to the faculty, the staff, but especially to the boys. Always seen to be talking with lower schoolers with sunglasses on, he began to be called "Hollywood," a nickname given to him by former Director of Development Jim Bob Womack '98.

He loved sharing his wisdom with them — what they should do as young men as they got older and took on more responsibility. But for the most part, he just loved sharing the moment. Whenever he would talk about the boys, his face would become jolly and he would take on the most uplifting spirit and tone.

Even on some of his bad days, whenever he talked with anyone, he would always snap back to his happy, cheerful and joking self, ending every conversation on a positive note — seeking to improve his situation instead of staying sour about it.

And improve his situation he did. Just after the tornado hit the school, Walker walked up to former English teacher Curtis Smith and asked for a favor.

Teach me to read, please.

Smith didn't know much about how to bridge the learning gap, but he felt it was a great idea. Walker was diligent and punctual, quiet and focused, and a wonderful student who was determined to learn to read.

"People call reading, writing and arithmetic subjects today, but they used to be called disciplines because you had to bear down and struggle a bit," Smith said. "Education is a humbling experience. Walker was willing to do that, and he was never exasperated by it."

Walker would always sit up straight in his chair in Smith's classroom, all his jackets and heavy shoes on. He would read *Go, Dog. Go!*, just checked out of the Lower School Library, sitting fixed in his seat — his focus never wavering.

"It's a dear way for a teacher to feel appreciated because

the student stays focused and wants to learn more in the short hours that we have together," Smith said. "It made me more determined to give back to Walker."

Soon, he started reading a few books independently. No prompts, no pauses.

He could just read the page, flip it and keep going. But other days, he would recall a word for the first part of the lesson and would completely forget it towards the end.

But he kept on meeting with Smith every week, sitting straight-backed, focused and determined every single hour.

They both set a goal to give a speech to the entire Upper School, to share, in one fell swoop, a few words of wisdom he had given dozens of times before — learning to listen to people and not making assumptions about them until they had thoroughly proved what kind of person they were.

But the day of his speech never came. The school was shut down for COVID, and they stopped the lessons. And just as the pandemic was ending, Walker's hobbling demeanor had grown to be noticeable. At first, it was a slight shuffle, but gradually, the shuffle became a limp, which became a stagger. The cuts on his leg, which was a result of his constant work, got worse. And his shoes, which had served him faithfully for over thirty years, were torn and ripped, which didn't make his condition any better.

Yet still, Walker continued to work. It didn't matter what held him back: he was relentless, tireless, and unbroken. He continued to wash pans, clean pots, and greet Marksmen. Chop wood, and carry water.

It was only when close friend, colleague and equipment manager Coach Ron Turner snapped his fingers and finally took him to the doctor where the true magnitude of his injuries was revealed.

Years of hobbling had resulted in permanent nerve damage. Over the years, Walker had slowly lost all the feeling in his legs, the discovery of which led to the first of many surgeries in Walker's life.

The procedure started as something minor — but still the limp remained. The surgery made it bearable but didn't fix everything. The damages to his legs were essentially irreparable.

But regardless of the news about the condition of his legs, Walker never complained once. In fact, he rejected the help he was offered. Never once did he let it slip in the cafeteria that his legs were ruined. Never once did he go to Nurse Julie to complain about his state. Never once did he show Marksmen the sad side of his story.

And when anybody tried to check up on him, it was always the same couple of responses.

I'm alright, man. I've paid my rent and all my bills on time.

I'm fine, man. I'm fine.

But when Turner pushed deeper, it was a different story. Through deep conversations outside of work, he found out about Walker's fair share of problems.

Walker, stubborn like a bulldog, made sure that he always got what he wanted. In this case, it was the desire to keep on working. And when food services tried their best to elevate Walker's role in the kitchen, that stubbornness shone through. When their opinions about the job differed from his, Walker grew impatient and eventually retired.

Happiness in retirement was short-lived. Since so much of his joy came from seeing members of the school's community, Walker spent his life in conversation. In addition, his leg forced him to constantly visit hospitals in Plano, White Rock and Baylor.

And in the matter of a few

PHOTO / COURTESY LORRE ALLEN



ALL SMILES

Despite all the flaws in his life, talking and connecting with others helped Walker maintain a constant positive and upbeat demeanor.

short years, Walker went from seemingly in good health to a double amputee, with both his legs cut off and replaced by prosthetics.

But still, even in a rehabilitation center to essentially relearn how to walk, Walker never once complained, but instead was eager and excited to relearn the skill.

I got my legs, coach, I got my legs!

For him, it was just another obstacle to conquer. Something he'd done all his life: chop wood, and carry water.

Eventually, the illness proved too much for him, and Walker had to be hospitalized, this time for a while.

Out of all his struggles, from boyhood to adulthood, this time spent in the hospital was likely the toughest for Walker. Devoid of all human interaction except for the nearby nurses, Walker lost his livelihood — which relied on his connection to the community. Slipping in and out of consciousness, he had to be constantly revitalized by medical personnel.

In spite of it all, his stubbornness continued to shine through. The hospital just wasn't the place for him, and eventually the struggle of everyday life got to him.

I wanna go home, man.

But in December of 2022, with his resilience fading, Walker made a pact with Director of Inclusion, Diversity and Human Resources Lorre Allen: that he would hang on to see the new year. The promise pushed Walker to his limits. Nevertheless, he continued to persevere, chopping wood, and carrying water.

Walker survived three months after the promise was fulfilled, until Monday, April 3rd, when medical staff cut his life support with the consent of family and friends.

He died next to a framed photo of the Path to Manhood statue, having taken on the role of the man with the boy upon his shoulders, carrying on the next generation of Marksmen. And just like the statue, Walker left his own legacy on the school — the legacy of Hollywood.

Editor's note: This story is a compilation of the perspectives of seven different people, all of whom were close to Mr. Walker.

Many thanks to Coaches Ron Turner and Dwight Phillips, former English instructor Curtis Smith, Chef Howard Stewart, Director of Diversity, Inclusion and Human Resources Lorre Allen, Ahlberg & Ribman Family Director of Alumni Relations Alex Eshelbrenner '04, and former food services worker May Sykes for their contributions to his story.

HOLLYWOOD

MOVIE STAR

Just like his namesake, Walker was a landmark of the community, as is the Hollywood sign in California.

GRAPHIC / JOSHUA GOFORTH