

I lost a lovely friend and former coworker this week.

Jan Tate Lee was the last of the Old Guard at The Rogersville Review, at least for me.

“Ain’t it funny how time slips away?” she wrote in one of her final columns.

Until April 7, 2017, the day I said my own goodbyes to our hometown newspaper, Jan and I worked together producing her weekly column, Downhome Cookin’ With the Singin’ Chef, for 10 years. The words were hers, the responsibility to make sure her weekly “funnies” and life experiences got to her readers was mine.

A couple weeks ago, I read that “Downhome Cookin’” had reached a milestone. It was Jan’s 500<sup>th</sup> Column and it also fell on her birthday, November 8.

Sadly, it was her last for both. Much to everyone’s dismay Jan succumbed to ill health this morning following a brief hospital stay; an unexpected journey that began on Thanksgiving.

Jan’s wit and laughter could light up a room, her piano skills and voice could send a round of applause through the sanctuary, and her love for the kitchen was celebrated—evidenced by her loyal readers.

Most of the time Jan would write her column from home and give me a call with any questions. Sometimes it was just to offer a “howdy do.” Through all those years, she and I would banter back and forth on a weekly basis.

“Hello, darlin,’” she’d say whenever we met, face to face or over the phone. It was a thing, she said, between me, her and Conway Twitty.

As the years passed, coworkers came and went, but Jan and I hung around.

Two, maybe three years ago—I honestly can’t remember now. Words are like water when they’re always flowing from the hands of those who write them—Jan’s computer “gave out,” as she put it. So, I told her to come make herself at home in the newsroom. She did, and it was always fun.

To use her own words, Jan was a “hoot.”

From across the cubicles, back and forth we’d banter, tell an occasional secret, share a life story, a hardship or two, and they would almost always end with laughter and a hug.

As the newsroom dwindled and cutbacks kept coming, I set up Jan a makeshift office in one of the empty rooms there. She’d drop in on Wednesdays to type away at the thoughts she’d penned on a Steno Pad the night before, accompanied by her favorite recipes from friends, relatives, and the bygone days she longed for.

Those times with Jan are memorable for me because Jan was just...Jan.

She wasn't a writer who sat out to be known for what she could do. She was a person who wanted to be valued for who she was, where life had taken her, and where she was going.

Jan's writing allowed her to take others on her journey, sharing the Southern tradition of friendship and good food along the way.

"Who says you can't have fun on the job?" she wrote in her final column. "I look forward to Wednesdays. I love spending time with all of them, writing my heart for you all and enjoying a day out of the house. God is good, all the time!"

That was also one of the most striking things about Jan—her resilience. She had lived a life filled with triumph over tragedy, having lost her daughter and husband as suddenly as we all lost Jan.

She often talked about her longing to see Amanda and Steve again, and in that same column titled "Ain't It Funny, How Time Slips Away," she said, "I can hardly wait to see them again, but I hope the Lord will let me live for a long time to come. When we all get to Heaven we'll sing and shout the victory! What a day that will be!"

Jan knew where she'd been and she knew where she was going. Her column, she'd tell me, was her therapy, but it was also her witness to a deeper past, as well as a hopeful future.

Jan not only loved to share the joy of cooking, she worked in ministry, played piano for her church, loved to travel, and took in those who needed help even when she was the one who needed a hand.

If there's one thing we could all learn from Jan Lee it's "You are loved"—the words she used to conclude many of her columns.

"There is so much to do and so little time to do it," she wrote back in August. "...Sometimes it's hard to be a human."

It really is.

When I left The Review, Jan sent a special post to my Facebook Wall that reads, "I want to take this opportunity to thank Joel Spears for being the best Managing Editor a girl could ever have!!! I'm gonna miss you Joel Spears!!! It was not only an honor to work with you, it was a pleasure also!!! We Had a lot of fun and long talks!!! Godspeed as you move on to the chapter in your life!!! Stay in touch!!!"

I've taken a screen shot of it, and I'm hanging onto that as I continue moving onto my next chapter, but I'm also gonna miss you, too, Jan. It really was an honor, a pleasure and so much

darn fun. I can't even imagine what your next chapter looks like, but I'm sure it's the grandest thing ever!

I was sitting here, trying to think of something to write for her when, "I'll Be Home For Christmas" came on the radio. I couldn't help but think, "How fitting." Jan finally made it home for Christmas, and despite the tears we all share today, I'd bet she's having the best Christmas of her life right now—singing, hugging, laughing, and being Jan.

"And that's the way I see it."