

MARK KRAM, JR.

Joe's Gift

FROM THE PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS

THE HOLLAND BOYS and their cousin, Lancer Perkins, had gone to Chennault Park early that June day for a picnic sponsored by a local TV station. The three ate free hot dogs at a tent that had been set up, stood in line to enter the amusement area, and then, one by one, sped down the big water slide until a custodian hurried them along so others could play. With the temperature well above ninety by noon and inching upward, the boys searched the park for another place to cool down, only to come upon a pond that was swarming with bathers. The boys walked along the edge of it, then one spotted a secluded spot beyond a grove of trees.

"Look!" shouted Perkins, eleven. "Nobody is over there! Come on!" Off he ran, and the two others followed, Harry Holland, Jr., eleven, and his brother, LeMarkits Holland, ten.

LeMarkits remembers Joe Delaney was sitting under a nearby tree chatting with a woman as the boys approached the edge of the pond. Just weeks from reporting for his third NFL season as a running back for the Kansas City Chiefs, Delaney had come to Monroe from his home in Haughton, about ninety miles away to help promote the events at the park that day. From his position under the tree, he had an unobstructed view of the boys, who locked hands and waded slowly into the shallows. Step by step they splashed on until suddenly, in the blink of a startled eye, they fell together over an unseen ledge on the bottom of the pond and found themselves clawing at the air bubbles that surrounded them. Delaney sprang to his feet.

LeMarkits bobbed up to the top, then slid under again. Water

overwhelmed him, forcing itself into his breathing cavities and down into his lungs. But just as the cold depths of the pond prepared to carry him away and claim him, a hand drew upon him and clamped on to his arm. With otherworldly force, the hand swept him into the light of day, where LeMarkits gulped for air. The hand propelled him into the shallows, but before it did, LeMarkits caught a glimpse of it that would remain embedded in his psyche for years to come. The pinkie on that hand had a small scar on it. LeMarkits crawled to the bank.

He remembers the woman with whom Delaney had been sitting shouting hysterically, "Help! Somebody help!"

LeMarkits gagged, then doubled over and vomited.

People from other parts of the park began running to the scene.

LeMarkits looked back at the pond, which now shimmered placidly in the sun. They were gone, Harry and Lancer and the brave soul who saved him, Joe Delaney. And LeMarkits just stood there and began to sob.

Close to eighteen years have passed since that day at Chennault Park — June 29, 1983 — and yet LeMarkits Holland cannot escape the horror of what happened to Joe Delaney and the others. In the bad dreams that have plagued him through the years, he always could see himself standing there on the bank as police divers drag up Harry and Lancer, eyes closed and splayed beneath a team of paramedics. Then up came Joe, his body tangled up in weeds. LeMarkits used to wake up in a cold sweat and shout, "No! No! Come back!" but the dreams he has had lately have been less graphic than just oddly spooky. All he sees now is that big hand with the scar on the pinkie.

"Crazy," LeMarkits Holland says with a sigh. "Even in dreams that are about something else, suddenly that hand just seems to come out of nowhere. And that happens over and over again."

All of our lives have a certain trajectory, the arc of which is drawn by circumstances that can be beyond our control. In the case of Joe Delaney, whose arc was only beginning to soar, the circumstances that conspired to bring him down from his trajectory came upon him unforeseen, suddenly, and altered the lives of an array of people. Bobbing in his steep wake are his beloved widow, Carolyn, who summoned a courage to endure that she could not know she had;

their three daughters, only two of whom barely remember him but are shepherded by his spirit; and, alas, LeMarkits. Overlooked in the hysteria that surrounded the incident was that one of the three boys — LeMarkits, then unidentified in published accounts — did not just swim to safety on the bank of the pond as reports indicated. Carolyn Delaney confirms that young LeMarkits also would have died if Joe had not saved him.

Today, LeMarkits Holland has found himself in search of yet another rescuing hand. At twenty-seven, Holland sits behind bars on a drug conviction here at the Ouachita Parish Correctional Center, or as it is known locally, "The Pea Farm," the grounds of which are used by inmates to grow produce. Wearing a red jump suit and sandals, Holland is ushered by a guard into a bare interview room at the prison and joined on this December day by his attorney, Robert C. Johnson. In jail since police picked him up in September, Holland pleaded guilty to distribution of cocaine and conspiracy to distribute cocaine and was sentenced on each count to five years, to run concurrently. Only too aware that he is squandering the second chance that Joe Delaney so courageously provided him, Holland says: "He would not be too happy to see me sitting in here."

No one surely had more to live for when he died so tragically than Joe Delaney. Well apart from the fact that he had a big career ahead of him with the Chiefs — with whom he had won AFC offensive rookie of the year honors in 1981 — Delaney could look forward to years of bliss with Carolyn and their three daughters: Tamika, seven, Crystal, four, and Joanna, four months. While Delaney was coming off a subpar year in 1982, in part due to an eye operation he'd had during the off-season to fix a detached retina, the Chiefs were prepared to sign him to a lucrative contract just before he died. In fact, the Delaneys were supposed to leave for Kansas City two days later and set up housekeeping there before the start of training camp. When Carolyn Delaney looks back on what happened instead, she is overcome with a sadness that remains just beyond words. Softly, she says, "Things were just going so well for us."

The years have not been easy for Carolyn and her children. With the only love she could ever imagine gone, Carolyn dedicated herself to the upbringing of her three daughters, taking on jobs as a day-care teacher and then as a driver for one of the local casinos.

While she is still only forty-three and youthful in appearance, she has not even gone out on a date since Joe died, concerned it somehow would interrupt the sacred bond she still has with her deceased husband. Carolyn has done a good job with the three girls, two of whom are off on their own and the youngest of whom is a star academically in high school. Joe would be proud of how Carolyn has held the household together, despite the fact that her income has been small and back taxes recently have forced her to sell the home she and Joe built years ago.

Carolyn Delaney was upset to hear what has become of LeMarkits Holland. While it had been years since she had been in contact with him or his mother, Nora Stubblefield, she had hoped that he had gone on and done well for himself, that the spirit of Joe would live on in him. But this is the wrong ending somehow. To hear that Holland is in jail on a drug conviction only enhances the deep sorrow Carolyn has endured in varying degrees since that June day nearly eighteen years ago. With pity in her eyes as she sits at her dining room table in Haughton a couple of months ago, she says that what happened to Holland leaves her feeling angry. She adds that Joe would "feel real bad about it," but is equally certain her husband would have kept in close contact with Holland. She says, "Joe would not have allowed that child to give up on himself."

But that appears to be just what LeMarkits Holland did so long ago. Inwardly, he became walled in by shadows, deeply troubled by the death of his older brother Harry and the others. He wondered why he had been the one who had been spared and not Harry, whom he remembers today as a "good kid who never got into trouble." While his mother conceded that she should have received counseling, she says she was overcome with grief over the loss of Harry and spiraled into alcoholism. LeMarkits stayed alone in his room for days on end. When schoolteachers corrected him, he became consumed by an unspoken rage, beneath which stood a hidden reservoir of tears over Harry, Lancer, and Joe. With eyes lowered and hands folded on the table before him at The Pea Farm, LeMarkits says, "Sometime I feel like it should have been me who died."

He sighs and adds, "Everything changed that day."

The Wednesday that Joe Delaney died began strangely. In the early morning hours, as he prepared to leave for Monroe, it was as if he

had some deep premonition that he would not be back. Carolyn remembers that he kept running back into the house to kiss his daughters goodbye, and asked if the two oldest, Tamika and Crystal, could join him on his trip. Carolyn told him no, that they would only get in his way. But he just seemed to oddly linger. When he asked her what she had planned for the day, she told him she had some shopping to do and would begin packing for Kansas City. They were scheduled to leave that Friday.

"Joe," she finally said. "You better get on now."

Then he kissed her, got into his baby blue Cougar, and drove off.

"I remember that day as if it were yesterday," says Carolyn. "He just did not want to leave us."

Joe and Carolyn had grown up down the street from each other in Haughton. Joe was one of eight children and had a twin sister, Joann. Carolyn remembers that Joe had it hard as a child, that he "only had two pair of pants to his name." They began dating at Haughton High School, where Joe won all-state honors as a wide receiver and defensive back and distinguished himself as a sprinter. Carolyn attended Northwestern State University in Natchitoches with Joe, but dropped out after a year, when she and Joe wed and their eldest daughter, Tamika, was born. Converted to a running back by head coach A. L. Williams, the five-foot-ten, 185-pound Delaney became the only State player to rush for 3,000 career yards. The couple had their second daughter, Crystal, when Joe was in his senior year, toward the end of which the Chiefs selected him in the second round of the 1981 NFL draft. Carolyn says, "We were just so in love."

Delaney showed immense promise with the Chiefs; you wonder today just how far he could have gone with his talent. That rookie year, he gained 1,121 yards on 234 carries (4.8 average) in fifteen games, set four club rushing records, and was bestowed with honors: AFC offensive rookie of the year; Pro Bowl starter; team MVP. Carolyn remembers that he used to toss his weekly check on top of the TV — \$11,000. Slowed by the eye operation that delayed his participation in training camp and held to just 380 yards on 95 carries in eight games during strike-shortened 1982, he had every reason to expect that the year ahead would bring better days as he drove into Chennault Park that day in June 1983. There, he signed autographs, chatted with some old friends, and by two o'clock had found a shady spot beneath a tree by the pond.

LeMarkits Holland remembers him sitting there as he approached the pond but was unaware of who he was; he had not even heard of Delaney at that point. Holland had been dropped off at the park with his brother, sister LaMisa, and Lancer by his dad, Harry Sr., who had gone off to buy beer and ice. In the care of aunts and uncles who also were at the park that day, the three boys had no way of knowing that the pond was a dangerous place. Only later would LeMarkits discover that a hole had been dug by the builders of the water slide and that it had been filled in with water. Consequently, the pond fell precipitously to a depth of twenty feet at the edge of the shallows, so it was as if a trapdoor had fallen from beneath the three boys. Though Delaney did not swim well, he bolted for the pond as if he had a football under his arm and dived in. Out came LeMarkits. Delaney dived back in again and vanished below the surface.

"Someone ran to get help, but I just stood there," Holland says. "An ambulance came, then the police, and then a diver went in to get them. They got Harry, then Lancer, and then Joe Delaney. They stretched them out there on the grass and worked on them, but Harry and Joe were dead. I was so scared."

Carolyn was relaxing in a rocking chair on the porch with Joanna on her lap when the phone rang inside the house. She held the baby in one hand and picked up the receiver with the other. Coolly, the caller told her that her husband had been in an accident and that she should come immediately to St. Francis Medical Center in Monroe. When Carolyn pressed her for details ("What kind of accident? Is Joe okay?"), the caller replied, "All we can say is that you should come to Monroe. We have your husband here." Upset, Carolyn hurried down the street and found her cousin, Billy Johnson, who offered to drive her to Monroe. On their way out of Haughton, Carolyn stopped off to see her mother-in-law, who was sitting on her porch. "Miss Eunice, they just called from Monroe and said Joe was in an accident," Carolyn said. "Do you want to come along with us?" But Eunice just said quietly, as if she knew something was terribly wrong: "No. You go."

Uneasy silence filled the car as Johnson headed east on Interstate 20 and stood on the accelerator; Carolyn just looked out her window at the passing swampland and wondered what possibly could have happened. She later would discover that by then it was

"all over the news," but the radio was off in the vehicle. Uncertain exactly where St. Francis Medical Center was located, Johnson stopped at a convenience store in Monroe to ask for directions, only to learn what had happened from the clerk behind the counter. Shaken, he came out and told Carolyn, "We are not too far away." He paused, then said again and again as they drove on: "Everything is going to be all right." They found the hospital and hurried into the emergency room.

Standing in the corridor there was a police officer, whom Carolyn approached to identify herself. Carolyn told him, "They said my husband is here." The police officer held up a piece of jewelry, a gold chain with her class ring attached to it. He said, "Does this belong to your husband?" When she told him it did, and told him she was sure, she was directed to a small room and told that a doctor would be in to see her shortly. Carolyn said anxiously, "Where is Joe? What happened to him?" She was told again that the doctor would be in shortly, but an hour passed and he still had not showed up. Carolyn walked out in the hallway at that point and was intercepted by a nurse. Says Carolyn: "I will never forget the look on her face."

Gravely, the nurse said, "Mrs. Delaney, your husband drowned around 2:30 this afternoon."

Carolyn looked at her with widening eyes and said, "No! Joe was coming to an event here. He was not supposed to be anywhere near water!"

The nurse replied sorrowfully, "All I know is they said he drowned in Chennault Park and was already dead when he got here."

Suddenly, Carolyn was sucked down into a whirlpool of unspeakable grief. Given a sedative by the doctors, she awoke to find herself in a hospital bed that evening. One of the nurses told her: "You have to identify the body." But Carolyn could not bring herself to do it; she would never see Joe in death. Cousin Billy identified the body that evening at the hospital. Carolyn was sedated again and only later told by doctors what had happened: Joe had died trying to save three boys from drowning in a pond. One of them — Harry Holland — was pronounced dead at the scene. The other — Lancer Perkins — died early Thursday at the hospital.

Gold crosses were placed in the hands of the two boys at their fu-

neral on July 3. Nora Stubblefield was overcome with anguish. How could it be, how could it possibly be, that son Harry was gone? The day is still so unreal to her: the boys in their coffins, the flowers everywhere, the pews overflowing with people. With tears running down his cheeks, LeMarkits stared in at the body of his dead brother, but he sat in the car when the service ended and did not go to the gravesite in the churchyard. LeMarkits says, "I could not stand to look at them sticking Harry in no hole."

Joe Delaney was buried the following day, July 4, in Haughton. Three thousand mourners filed into the gymnasium at Haughton High School, including a contingent of twenty club officials and teammates from the Chiefs. Owner Lamar Hunt said, "Joe was a good man, a real good man." Coach John Mackovic, who had replaced Marv Levy during that offseason, and others eulogized Joe as a hero, and a telegram showed up from President Reagan, who assured that Delaney has "surely earned his place in heaven for having sacrificed his life for those three boys." Carolyn held Joanna in her arms as she stood with her two other young daughters at Hawkins Cemetery, where Joe Delaney lies under a headstone paraphrasing a quote from John 15:13. "Greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for another."

Going to jail has given LeMarkits Holland time to think. With no prior criminal record to speak of other than some disorderly conduct charges stemming from some street fights, Holland says he was "just in the wrong place at the wrong time" when the cops grabbed him, and he has no intention of ever going back behind bars. He plans to better himself, get a job and perhaps his graduate equivalency degree, and take care of his three sons, ages nine, seven, and two, who are in the custody of family and friends. He wants them to remember the three people who died that day in the pond.

"They would not even be here if Joe Delaney had not jumped in and saved me," says Holland, who has an upper tooth capped in gold. "And I would not be in jail today if I had just stopped to think how lucky I was that he got to me. When the boys get older, you better believe they will know who Joe Delaney was. And Harry and Lancer."

He pauses and with a sigh adds, "Lord help me get through this."

But LeMarkits Holland has been in captivity far longer than since September. What happened that tragic day at Chennault Park has held him in an iron grip, just as it has held his parents, Carolyn Delaney, and her three daughters. In the case of Holland, then just in the fifth grade, it was especially horrifying to lose Harry, to whom he looked up with pride. Harry was always an easygoing child, just like his dad that way, and LeMarkits followed him everywhere. They fished together, played ball together, and occupied a bedroom together. Harry was always well behaved, did his chores without being asked twice, but LeMarkits could be a problem for his mother, Nora, who remembers: "He got his share of whuppings." Quietly, LeMarkits says: "I always think about Harry."

Change came over LeMarkits in the wake of the deaths. A wall just seemed to go up between him and everyone else in the world. Oddly, he says he began to systematically erase Harry from the premises: he sold his bicycle, gave away his books, beanbag chair, and other belongings, and set fire to his clothes. The boys had twin beds, but LeMarkits told his mom to get rid of them, that he would burn them, too, unless she did. When LeMarkits would shout out in his sleep, Nora would come into his bedroom and wake him up, only to find him curled up in a ball on his single bed and dripping with sweat. Only rarely would LeMarkits bring up the subject of what happened at the pond, during which he would say sadly: "If only Harry was still here." But whenever that would happen, Nora would just reply with a weary sigh: "Please, Marty. Not today, okay?" And once again that wall would go up.

Nora Stubblefield was in a long free fall herself. On the day Harry drowned, she was supposed to have had the day off at the nursing home where she worked. She had planned to go to Chennault Park that day, but her supervisor summoned her in with the promise that she could leave early. When Nora finally got to the park that afternoon, she saw an ambulance heading the other way and thought, "Oh God, somebody came down with heat stroke." She discovered otherwise when daughter LaMisa came running up to her and, with eyes wide with panic, told her: "Mama! Mama! Your son is drowning!" Nora hurried along with her, certain that she had been referring to Marty. Harry hated the water; he even hated taking baths. Says Nora, "Marty would swim in the cesspool behind the house."

But it was Harry who was lying on the bank when she got to the pond; LeMarkits was standing off to the side with tears in his eyes. Hysterically, Nora cried, "Who pushed him in? I'll kill him!" She then passed out. When she came to later in the hospital, she looked up at her surroundings and screamed: "My baby!" A doctor gave her a sedative and she slipped into a deep sleep.

All that followed is a long blur to Nora, who says she began chasing away the sadness that enveloped her with booze and cigarettes. When she and her remaining children attended the funeral for Joe Delaney in Haughton, it only added to her ordeal to overhear scowling bystanders say: "Look at that country hick from Monroe." Rumors had spread that she had been with Delaney at Chennault Park, that the two of them had been having an affair, but Nora told Carolyn back at her house that she had never even heard of her husband. Steeped in an alcoholic haze and soon out of a job ("I just stopped caring," she says), Nora began assigning blame to herself for what happened. She blamed her supervisor for calling her into work on her off day, which would have been her first in twelve days. She blamed her former husband, Harry, who dropped the boys off at the park and went to pick up picnic supplies. Why had he not been there?

Harry understands why she blamed him. "I used to sit down and cry about it," says Holland, a custodial supervisor at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. "I could have stayed there until their mama got there. But they had their aunts and uncles around and I thought they would be fine. And when I left they were at the water slide, not that itty-bitty pond."

Grief over young Harry blinded both parents to the deepening problems LeMarkits faced. Along with his inability to open up to anyone, his teachers told Nora that he just seemed to be in "outer space" in class, not hearing a single word that had been said. Corrected by a superior, he would suddenly lash out, which along with his propensity for fisticuffs earned him suspensions from schools. When a teacher recommended to her that he undergo psychological counseling, Nora replied: "What he is gonna *get* is a whupping." When LeMarkits was once again suspended in the tenth grade, Nora was by that point a contractor and began using LeMarkits as a helper on the job. LeMarkits did not go back to school. Well before his twenty-first birthday, he was running with what Nora calls a bad crowd and was on an express for either jail or an early grave.

Nora has come to blame herself. "I should have been stronger," says Nora, who has conquered her alcoholism and says she has placed herself in the hands of God. "I used to blame Harry Sr. and everyone else, but I should have been there for him more than I was. I realize that now. But losing Harry was just so hard to swallow. I could not get over the fact that I had just seen him at 6:00 A.M. and when I saw him again, he was lying there by that pond and did not have a single breath still in him."

What Nora has become increasingly thankful for is that Joe Delaney saved even one of her sons that day. Had both of them died, she is certain she would have been swept under. She calls Delaney "heroic," says that he would have to be to do what he did for a stranger. Now she says she has to do her part, which is to help LeMarkits "get his life back together." Currently the driver of an eighteen-wheeler, Nora says she and LeMarkits have talked over the idea of leaving Monroe once he gets out. He is eligible for parole next month. She and her new husband plan to build a house in Texas, where LaMisa is a staff sergeant in the Army. Nora says it was a blessing that LeMarkits was arrested, that he can soon begin over and carry on the spirit of the person who saved him. Says LeMarkits, "If I ever come back to jail, it will be for working too hard."

LeMarkits has not been back to Chennault Park since the drowning, nor does he have any desire to go there again. The part of the pond where the three drownings occurred was drained and filled in, part of a court judgment that Carolyn, Nora and Harry Sr. won against the city of Monroe. Chennault Park still has a big pond nearby that on a hot summer day can seem inviting to young boys. Surrounded by evergreens inhabited by chirping fowl, the pond on cold winter days is a study in solitude: a turtle suns itself in a bare spot in the weeds, a convoy of ducks paddles by. There is no indication that a courageous man once died near here, only a sign that someone placed here the day after the deaths occurred that said: "No Swimming."

Another strange thing happened a day before Joe Delaney passed; Carolyn says it was another premonition. Out that day to take Joanna for a checkup, she had come home to find Joe sitting at the dining room table with the Bible open and a pad of paper. He was drawing a picture. She walked over with the baby in her arms and

looked over his shoulder, curious to see what he was working on. Oddly, on the paper before him was a depiction of hands folded in prayer. She asked him, "Why did you draw that, Joe?"

Joe looked up at her and replied, "Somehow it just came to me. And I want you to have it, just so you know that God does hear prayers."

Carolyn wonders how their life together would have been, the impact his daily presence would have had on their daughters. Would they be better off somehow? Or are they stronger today because they had to be? No one can ever know that; the trajectory of their lives was irrevocably altered back at Chennault Park. Going in the pond for those boys exacted an immeasurable price, but she knows Joe would do it again, even if he knew that the child he saved would end up behind bars. Carolyn still holds out hope that LeMarkits will find himself. He is still so young. But whatever becomes of him in the years to come, she can carry within her the knowledge that this is true: the deeds of her husband will live on for as long as courage is a virtue.

Carolyn cannot bear to even hang pictures of Joe anywhere in her house, a three-bedroom rancher somewhat smaller than the home she and Joe once had. Up above the fireplace are framed photographs of her daughters, the older ones in cap and gown, but it would be too hard for her to display shots of Joe. They would remind her once again of the years that were stolen from them. Somewhere in the house there are boxes with old pictures of Joe, along with his scrapbooks, trophies, and other odds and ends. Joanna has told her that she would like to have them one day when she has a house of her own. She wants to decorate a room with them, if only to conjure up a connection to a man who died before she even knew him. Joanna's sisters remember him.

Tamika, twenty-five, says Joe used to play the guitar and take her fishing. "But I know what people have told him: that he considered others before himself," said Tamika, whose legacy of tragedy was passed down to her daughter, six, and son, two, when her fiancé was gunned down in California in a drive-by shooting. "Now I have two children who will never know their father." Tamika works with the mentally ill.

Crystal, twenty-one, says she remembers how her father used to take her to the corner store for candy. "It was hard for us growing

up without a father," said Crystal, a fine high school athlete who was placed in counseling by Carolyn at a young age. "But Mom was always there for us." Crystal attends community college.

Joanna, seventeen, agrees. "She is such a strong person. But she has never gotten over Daddy." Joanna will attend LSU in the fall and study nursing.

One day her daughters would like to see Carolyn find someone to share her life with. But whenever they say, "Mama, when are you going to go out on a date?" Carolyn laughs and replies, "Where am I ever going to find another man like your dad? He was my soul mate." Secretly, she fears that if she found someone else that Joe would stop visiting her, which always has been an event to which she has looked forward. Someone once told her that she was only dreaming, that by not seeing Joe in death she did not allow herself any closure. While early on she would not accept the fact that Joe was dead, certain that it was someone else in the pond and that Joe would come back, the passing years have convinced her that he is gone, but only in the flesh. Certain that she was awake one day before she sold their old house — or was she? — she says that Joe sat down on the edge of her bed.

"Carolyn," he said. "I have always been there for you and I always will."

She asked him what she should do.

Gently, he placed a caressing hand on her cheek and said, "But the time has come to move on."