

A Brief Sketch of Jim Hsieh's Life, 1944 – 2008

1 February 2008

Hsieh Ke-Yi (謝克毅), *aka* Jim or Jimmy Hsieh, the fourth child of Haoling (灑齡) and Janie Lee (李靜宜) born on 2 June 1944 in Chongqing (重慶), China, died unexpectedly of cardio arrest on 24 January 2008 at home in Franklin, Tennessee.

He is preceded by his parents and son Erich (Yobi) (念平) of his second former wife Barbara Ramsey. He is survived by his sons Brent (念祖) and Loren (念仁) of his first former wife Carolyn Hall, and his sisters Nancy (寧秀) of West Lafayette, IN and Lucy (渝秀) of Palo Alto, CA, and brother Johnny (克強) of Tucson, AZ and their respective spouses, children and grandchildren.

His friends have been his family in Franklin and Nashville, TN and elsewhere. He was loved for his openness, enthusiasm, caring and loyalty. His work won several awards and recognitions from regional, national, and international graphic arts societies. In addition to teaching part time at Middle Tennessee State University, he also worked with the Williamson County Literacy Council as a volunteer teacher in English and math to newly arrived immigrants, thus learning Spanish from some of the students. He also taught math in the prison system in his community. In his spare time he entertained at a nursing home with his songs and guitar. His art, music, service to others in different stations of life, and his joyful response to the Grace of God have touched many. We will rely on his friends in Nashville to tell us stories about him and his volunteer work among immigrants, elderly, children, and prisoners, while we the family provide the following sketch of Jim's life. Surely, more can and will be added as the news of his untimely death spreads.

War creates unlivable conditions for people. Jim and his mother were not expected to live very long after his delivery – Jim was less than 5 lbs and his mother was anemic. By the Grace of God, they both survived. His weak mother was not able to breast feed Jim. An elder cousin 謝叔偉 (Hsieh Shu-Wei) gave the family a goat, which later Jim referred to as his “Yang Mama” (Goat Mother).

After the war his family sailed down the Yangtze River to Shanghai, where they were baptized into the Chinese Episcopal Church. In 1948, the Chinese Communists advanced towards Shanghai and the family fled to Taiwan. At the age of 5, he was denied kindergarten admission in Tainan, because he drew a foot instead of pointing to his feet when asked to identify his feet. In Taipei, a 1st grade teacher recognized his talent and gave him an independent art exhibit at school in his 2nd grade. Earlier, his entry to an all-Taiwan drawing competition was, however, rejected because none of the judges believed it was the work of a seven-year old. At home, his parents encouraged him by supplying him with paper and pencil without being asked. In 1952, the family moved to Manila, Philippines where his father began a new assignment. Jim continued his Chinese classes and started English in 1st grade at St. Stephen's Chinese School, operated by the American Episcopal Church. Five years later, his father was transferred to Bangkok, Thailand and Jim followed. At the International School of Bangkok (ISB), most of the students were Americans and their music, including Elvis Presley, Nat King Cole, Johnny Mathis

and others, lured him to guitar playing (self-taught) and singing. But according to Jim – all his siblings had left home for study in America – it was his maternal grandmother, who had bound feet, never went to school and smoked Camel cigarettes, who introduced him to Elvis Presley.

After graduating from ISB in 1961, he crossed the Pacific on S. S. President Cleveland and entered Wabash College in Crawfordsville, IN. His interest in fine arts drew him away from a liberal arts education in his junior years. About the same time, he fell in love with Carolyn Hall and they got married in 1965. Carolyn started her career in social work, and Jim took on odd jobs while studying at the Chicago Art Institute. Their first son Brent was born in 1967, one year before Jim completed his BFA. In 1968, the young family moved to Champaign-Urbana, IL so Jim could earn an MFA in Metal Sculpture from the University of Illinois in 1970, the same year when Loren was born. Moving to Nashville, TN in 1971, after a brief stint in teaching at Ball State University in Muncie, IN, brought him deeper into country music, while instrument repair and later commercial illustration provided a living.

His misadventures in IL and IN resulted in a divorce in 1975, but the couple never stopped working together to provide their sons a nourishing childhood in Nashville.

Jim married Barbara Ramsey in 1979. They had a son Yobi in 1983. The illness and untimely death of Yobi in 1985 brought much pain to Jim and Barbara. The Rev. Will Campbell and his wife Brenda were the source of their strength and comfort. They moved from Nashville to a house in the countryside outside Franklin, TN where Jim set up an art studio. Jim began to work more on his own paintings, in addition to persevering with his commercial work and song writing. In 1997, Jim was finally willing to share his own work and, 46 years after his first show when he was 7 years of age, he had a formal exhibit of his paintings with artistic furniture by friend and former student DiAnne Patrick. During this time, Jim was also enamored with the idea of becoming a farmer. His desire to farm the land proved to be short-lived, however, and his tractor was used to maintain a running track around the property. Sadly, his marriage to Barbara ended in 1998.

Despite his broken marriages, Jim was a wonderful son, brother and uncle and an unsurpassed father. Whenever he visited his parents in California, he brought them laughter and joy. At his father's 90th birthday, he presented him with a large painting of giant peaches, a traditional symbol of longevity in China. The novelty was not in the theme, but in the technique – Jim knew human anatomy well and did not hesitate to use appropriate parts of his own and his two sons' to achieve the desired artistic effect (Barb used her thumbs instead). The peaches were a success and everyone at the banquet could not stop laughing...and blushing. His imitation of his father on the phone in English and Chinese was a masterpiece that will be remembered by all who witnessed it.

As a parent, his love, enthusiasm and caring was a cornerstone in the lives of his children. All parents use the phrase “this hurts me more than it hurts you” but with Jim you believed it. Jim loved kids. Young people of all ages admired and adored him in return. His joy of life, child-like curiosity, fun-loving humor and extraordinary talents as a mimic endeared him to all, especially his nieces and nephews and their children.

His cousin, Felix Lee, a music professor emeritus in Vienna who specializes in Viennese songs and accordion music, after hearing Jim's CD "Blue Horizon" wrote, "*Jim is not only a gifted composer and lyricist, but also has a wonderful voice. We hope that he with his message will touch people's hearts. We are inspired by this CD.*"

Beyond the visual and audio beauty, Jim had a deep theological grounding. In an e-mail exchange with his brother on 16 October 2007, he wrote:

"I don't know if I can teach anyone about Grace. Maybe I can describe what little I know of it; I was just discussing something like it yesterday with Tom, a close friend who's also lost a young child. All I know is that I could not have gone through the experience without help from One with universal but personal compassion. What resulted was not complete closure of any kind, but a gentle nudging to keep what remains of a broken heart broken, and thus cracked and open...for others, in the spirit of loving, giving, forgiveness, compassion, and all around goodness. I suppose I could have easily turned the other way and become bitter and resentful, thinking myself a victim of unfair circumstance. That kind of thinking would have put the focus on me, instead of on Yobi, his great suffering, and his memory. And I could have none of that. Of course the struggle was not pretty, and at times I still struggle and go a little crazy missing him. But with much prayer, crying, and the love and help of close friends turned angels, and not feeling as it was a decision of any sort, Love and a quiet Joy gradually took over the reins. That is as close as I could come in describing Grace, a gift undeserved but with impeccable timing, and a gift by it's very compassionate nature, to be given away, with full gratitude, to others."

The above fragmentary account is the work of Brent, Loren, Carolyn, Barb, Jim's siblings, and his friends Tom Sturdevant and DiAnne Patrick. We encourage all those inspired to share their remembrances, so we will have a more complete story of Jim. May the Grace that gave Jim Love and Joy, also embrace you.