

Remembering an uncle who was so much more

Family titles can be complicated. There are mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, halves and steps, aunts and uncles, nieces, nephews and cousins. In today's world of blended families, "titles" can get interesting. One of my grandsons has four grandmothers, all who love him dearly and work hard to make sure he knows that.

The titles often don't express what is in the heart. We use "like a" to boost the relationship when we hit one of those. "She's my cousin, but she's like a sister to me." "I'm his cousin, but I'm like an aunt to him." I have quite a few family relationships that just don't fit the scope of the familial title, and I find myself struggling to explain to others the depth of the connection.

Such was the case with my Uncle Jimmy, who died this week at the age of 85.

Uncle Jimmy was one of my father's younger brothers. My dad, who died at age 35 while serving as a captain in the U.S. Air Force, was the oldest of seven children, all born and raised in a small town in North Carolina. My father joined the service when he was too young to do so, served his time, then left and went to college, then went back into the Air Force, where he was a navigator.

Uncle Jimmy followed him and made a career in the Air Force, then spent 20 years teaching high school ROTC after he retired.

When my father died, the North Carolina Gardners made sure that my young mother, my brother and I were surrounded by family. Uncle Jimmy and Uncle Frank handled many of the details that overwhelmed my mother while dealing with their own sadness and their grieving parents.

The commitment, however, came later. Trips to North Carolina from West Tennessee weren't easy then, but my mom on the Tennessee side and my family on the North Carolina side made sure those trips happened every year. We were connected and loved. We spent time together, so the relationships deepened and grew roots.

Uncle Jimmy provided something else that it is hard to put a value to. Through the years, he added dimension and substance to my knowledge of my father. I was 6 years old when my dad died, so my own memories are few. Uncle Jimmy and I would talk about the growing-up years, the girlfriends, the cars he drove, his relationship with his brothers and sisters, the Air Force time. Conversations with Uncle Jimmy and the North Carolina aunts and uncles gave depth to my understanding of who my father was.

In the last year, the Uncle Jimmy I knew so well began slipping away. I knew my visit with him in July would probably be the last. He tried to rally while we were there, but he really just wanted to sleep.

I already miss my Uncle Jimmy. Saying goodbye to people you love is never easy, no matter the circumstances. All my aunts and uncles set a high bar that goes beyond the title. The richness and love they all give so freely has always connected us through good and bad times.

Perhaps it should always be enough just to say, “We’re family.”