

# Journeys revisited

An update on four extraordinary people who follow the beat of their own drums.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
December 25, 2016



---

This year in Personal Journeys we told the stories of 37 extraordinary Georgians. There were tragic stories about the death of a child, a grown son gone missing, a brush with a fatal illness. There were inspiring stories about a real estate developer creating innovative solutions to the affordable housing crisis and an attorney whose pro bono case turned into a life-long friendship. And we told stories of amazing human feats about the man who climbed the Seven Summits and the women who traced their father's paths as POWs in World War II.

As the year comes to a close, we check in on past Personal Journeys from 2016 to see how they've fared.

---

## The fixer

*Jane Warring (right) and her wife Kelli Moore help Leon Sims with his grocery shopping at Kroger. Photo by Steve Schaefer*



---

**'One person helping one person' can change lives**

On a recent rainy afternoon, Leon Sims, 91, and his friends, Jane Warring and her wife Kelli Moore, set up a small Christmas tree in his East Point apartment. As they decorated the tree with red ornaments and purple ribbons, Bing Crosby played on the stereo. It was a cozy holiday moment and a nice way to end a chilly afternoon of grocery shopping.



*Photo by Steve Schaefer*

For years, Sims, a widower with no children, had lived alone in a bed-bug infested unit with a broken stove in a run-down apartment building in East Point. He exchanged his social security check for cash at a local gas station, and paid his bills by money order. The only regular, face-to-face contact he had with another human being was a home health aide, covered by Medicaid, who gave him a twice weekly bath.

But everything changed in the winter of November 2012 when Warring, then a 32-year-old corporate attorney doing volunteer legal work, knocked on Sims' door. She had agreed to take on his bed-bug case. But from the moment she stepped inside his apartment, she realized his problems extended beyond the bugs.

As reported in a [Personal Journeys](http://specials.myajc.com/fixer/) story called "The Fixer" in February. (<http://specials.myajc.com/fixer/>), Warring helped Sims find a clean, safe apartment. She helped replace his clothes and furniture, which had been too bug-infested to salvage. She helped him learn how to use a glucose monitoring kit to better manage his diabetes. She helped him set up a bank account. And when she was done, she didn't walk away. She remained a steady presence in Sims' life, helping him with grocery shopping and doctors appointments.

More importantly, though, she provided Sims with companionship.

Before Warring came into his life, Sims spent much of his time in solitude. There was his sister, his only living relative, who lived in Griffin and called him every night to check on him; a friendly cabbie he paid to take him around town; a neighbor who occasionally met him for a meal at a barbecue restaurant.



But now Warring and Moore included Sims in their holiday celebrations. They took him on outings, including his first Braves game. In October they went to Six Flags Over Georgia, where Sims tried chili fries for the first time and gave them a thumbs up.

“After five hours of exploring the park, I asked Mr. Sims if he was tired, and he said, ‘No. Not at all,’” Jane said with a chuckle.

After our story on Warring and Sims was published, readers responded with donations of food and clothing, including a Burberry trench coat. An anonymous donor gave \$1,000 to Warring to cover some of Sims’ expenses.

“The reactions we received from the article were overwhelming,” said Warring. “The experience reinforced what I know to be true: That for every person in need, there is someone wanting to help.”

And now Sims’ circle of support has grown. Warring’s friends Seema Reddy and Laura Findley have also befriended him and help out with grocery shopping and doctors appointments. Findley recently spent an afternoon in the emergency room with Sims when he became dehydrated from a stomach bug. Reddy has invited him to spend the holidays with her, since Warring and Moore will be out of town for Christmas.

“My friends have helped immensely over the years,” said Warring. “They have become part of his support system.”

There is no doubt Warring and her friends have changed Sims’ life for the better. But Warring said she’s better for their relationship, too.

“What I’ve learned is that it doesn’t take any special skill or talent to make a difference. It takes a willingness to continue to show up and do it,” she said. “That’s what we need more of, one person helping one person.”

As they decorated the tree in Sims’ apartment, he told Warring he planned to go Walmart in the coming days to buy something to donate to a holiday gift drive.



"It is a gift to be able to give," said Warring, "and Mr. Sims feels that, too."  
— *Helena Oliviero*

---

## Keeper of the island

*AJC file photo.*



---

### **Centenarian Sandy West wants to live out her days on Ossabaw Island, but time may be running out.**

In hindsight, maybe it was the right thing to do to spirit Eleanor "Sandy" Torrey West away from her beloved Ossabaw Island.

After all, Hurricane Matthew deluged the island in October, felling massive oak trees, ripping tiles from roofs and making impassable many of Ossabaw's shell-encrusted byways.

West, 103 and in failing health and finances, had been removed from her island five months earlier for an assisted-living center in Savannah. Then, a few days before the storm hit Coastal Georgia, West was evacuated to Augusta.

A representative of The Ossabaw Island Foundation described Sandy as “alert and justifiably cranky, and eager to be reunited with her dog Toby” upon her post-Matthew return to Savannah.

And yet another chapter in the oh-so-fascinating life of Sandy West unfurls.

Sandy’s parents bought Ossabaw in 1924 joining other Northern industrialists who wintered on Georgia’s barrier islands. Champagne brunches, yacht races, boar hunts and square dances at homes owned by Fords, Rockefellers and Reynoldses ensued.

But it was Ossabaw’s natural charms — the moss-shrouded pathways, freshwater ponds, untrammelled beaches and 800-year-old oaks — that truly captivated Sandy. An artist, author, naturalist and philanthropist, Sandy transformed the island twice the size of Bermuda into a writer and artist’s colony.



*Photo by [Curtis Compton](mailto:cocompton@ajc.com)  
(<mailto:cocompton@ajc.com>).*

She and her second husband, Clifford West, created The Ossabaw Foundation in 1961, pouring most of their money into a retreat where Ralph Ellison, Margaret Atwood, Annie Dillard and other creatives could work in solitude. Raucous dinners often ensued at the circa 1924, red-tiled, pink-stuccoed Spanish

revival mansion, aka the Main House or Sandy’s home, which overlooks the sound.

The good times didn’t last. Sandy sold Ossabaw to the state of Georgia in 1978 with the proviso she could remain in the mansion until she died. Public access remains limited and the island’s foundation manages the buildings and cultural affairs.

Earlier this year it became clear Sandy could no longer afford to live on Ossabaw. When we published our story, “Keeper of the Island” in March (<http://specials.myajc.com/keeper-island/>), a GoFundMe account had been established to raise enough money to cover her health care and keep the lights on. About \$70,000 was raised, not enough to keep Sandy at home.

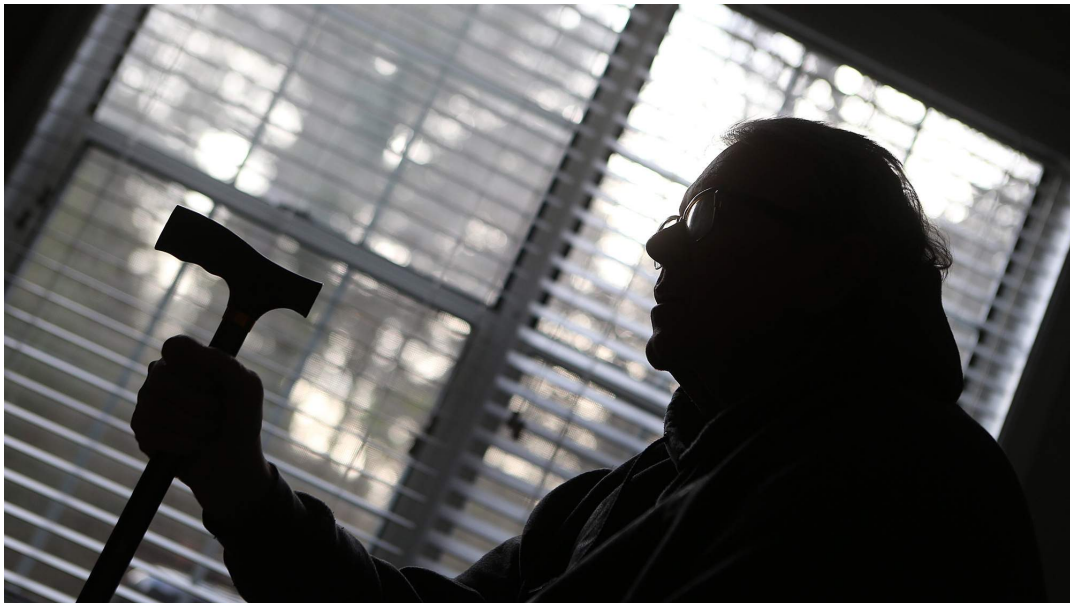
She took the quick ferry ride to the mainland in early May. She hasn't been back since. A friend says she's doing "amazingly good" given her age, waning health and memory, not to mention her absence from the island she so loved.

— *Dan Chapman*

---

## Fixing to die

*Doug Monroe was hospitalized in 2015 with the virulent infection C Diff and nearly died. After he recovered, he went on a healing retreat in Peru and got sick again, but he's back on the mend. Photo by [Curtis Compton \(mailto:cocompton@ajc.com\)](mailto:cocompton@ajc.com)*



---

### **Battle with deadly super-bug upends writer's life. He's one of the lucky ones.**

After my [Personal Journey](http://specials.myajc.com/fixing-to-die/) was published in February. (<http://specials.myajc.com/fixing-to-die/>) about my brush with death from C. Diff (*Clostridium difficile colitis*), septic shock and a giant blood clot, my health continued to improve. I started walking without a cane and graduated from physical therapy to lifting light weights in my doctor's gym.

Unfortunately, my bad-idea gland kicked in.

I found this guy on the internet who said his Crohn's disease – similar to the ulcerative colitis that has plagued me for 20 years – was cured by a shaman in Peru using a brew called ayahuasca, made from jungle plants. In addition to its purported healing properties, ayahuasca induces an altered state that lasts four to eight hours and includes hallucinations. Participating in ayahuasca ceremonies has become something of a tourist attraction among some travelers to Peru, but my interest was in its medicinal value.

The guy passed my name along to an organization putting together a group of sick folks for a five-week plant-medicine retreat into the Amazon jungle to work with several shamans supervised by an American doctor. I signed up and paid \$4,000, plus round-trip plane tickets.

What could possibly go wrong?

We stayed in individual wooden cabins with bathrooms and ceiling fans in a hilltop clearing in the Amazonian cloud forest, with vast views of the Andes. Each morning, huge red, yellow and blue macaws in a tree near the dining area called out "Hola!" hoping for bits of our breakfasts. Skinny chickens skittered about, and untethered horses rubbed against the cabins to scratch their backs. All the Peruvians at the facility were friendly, kind and helpful. The shamans brought with them a beatific woman named Lourdes, who gave us therapeutic massages.

But eight of us were there because we were sick. The worst part of my disease, ulcerative colitis, is chronic diarrhea. After I started drinking some of the plant medicines — not ayahuasca, that was reserved for the ceremonies held at night — the diarrhea got worse. I met with the senior shaman and, speaking through a translator, explained my situation. He prescribed different plants, but they didn't seem to help.

I got to a point I couldn't choke down the salt-free food cooks prepared for us. I even gagged on our purified water. I lost 15 pounds.

Because of my condition, the shamans wouldn't give me ayahuasca. But I attended the ceremonies anyway. We lay on mattresses in the dining area, which had a roof but was open on the sides, while the shamans chanted ancient blessings and blew the smoke of jungle tobacco on our heads. The



ceremonies went on for hours. Mosquitoes feasted on us. Being on the floor for hours aggravated my osteoporosis and the five compression fractures in my spine. I went back to using the cane.



*Photo by [Curtis Compton](mailto:ccompton@ajc.com)  
(<mailto:ccompton@ajc.com>).*

I kept getting sicker. By the time the five weeks were up, I was so sick I could barely stand. At the Lima airport, I was taken aboard the plane in a wheelchair.

When we arrived in Atlanta, I was delirious but managed to tip an airport employee to get me through customs and put me in a cab to

Piedmont Hospital.

The emergency room doctor was shocked I was still conscious. I was diagnosed with sodium deficiency, dehydration, e-coli and pleisamonas shigelloides, a bacteria found in river water. I lay in the hospital four days with IVs dripping fluids, antibiotics and steroids into my veins. When I was finally released, my sister took me to my apartment in Athens on a boiling hot day. I turned on the AC and it didn't work. I started to cry.

From his home in Philadelphia, my son found me one of the last available motel rooms in Athens that weekend. My ankles swelled like balloons. After I got home, Medicare sent therapists to help me walk again.

I've gradually improved. I walk without the cane again. And I've since had carpal tunnel and cataract surgeries. I go to Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta every eight weeks for an infusion of a biologic medicine for the colitis.

One downside to the treatment is a weakened immune system. Earlier this month I thought I might be getting a cold. Three days later, I was in the emergency room at Piedmont Athens Regional with a fever of 101.4. I was diagnosed with sepsis, a respiratory infection and an acute urinary tract infection. I went home after two days with a prescription for antibiotics, probiotics and prednisone.

My kids have insisted I see a psychiatrist, just in case my bad-idea gland kicks in again. I'm now meditating and avoiding the poison well of Facebook.

My ex-wife invited me to her Thanksgiving gathering in Augusta. Our son called in using FaceTime with holiday greetings from Philly. Then the doorbell rang and my ex-wife screamed with joy. Our son and his wife had FaceTimed from the driveway. They had traveled down for an all-time great prank.

Some days, despite myself, I look in the mirror and paraphrase Gene Wilder's great line from the movie "Young Frankenstein": "Alive. I'm alive! I'm ALIVE!"

— Doug Monroe

---

## Usher for the ages

Walter Banks at his home where memorabilia from a 51-year career as an usher for the Braves and other sports teams and events is on display. Photos by [Hyosub Shin \(mailto:hshin@ajc.com\)](mailto:hshin@ajc.com)



---

### **Walter Banks looks back over his 50 years with the Atlanta Braves.**

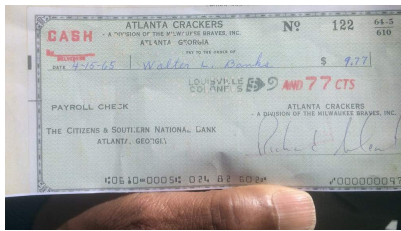
Braves fans treated long-time stadium usher Walter Banks like the hero he is after his [Personal Journey, "Usher for the Ages,"](http://specials.myajc.com/braves-usher/) (<http://specials.myajc.com/braves-usher/>) was published in June. The story

came out on a Sunday when Atlanta played the Chicago Cubs at home, and the future World Series champs couldn't hold a candle to the Braves' longest-serving usher that day.

Fans lined up with copies of the newspaper to get Banks' autograph as he worked section 107 at Turner Field, just behind and to the right of home plate.

"It was so nice," he said with characteristic modesty.

Banks began working for the Braves the year the team arrived in Atlanta in 1965. He keeps a copy of his first paycheck, a Citizens & Southern National Bank draft for \$9.77.



Since then he and his inspired acts of kindness have become an iconic part of the Braves experience.

"I look around and just pick somebody out, and I hope they're from out of town," he said. "I'll stop and speak to them. They'll tell them me where they're from. I'll say, 'Do me a favor. When you get inside, come over to 107 and I'll let you experience batting practice.'"

With the team about to relocate to Cobb County, Banks was unsure whether he'd be able to come, too. At 77, he doesn't like to drive at night, and the limited public transportation options to the suburbs had him wondering about whether he'd be able to make the move.

"I would miss the community," Banks said earlier this year, pondering the possibility of a future without the Braves. "The section I work in, I call it a community. You have so many people you get to know. They bring their children, then they grow up and bring their children. I would miss that camaraderie. If I didn't see them, that's what I would really miss."

Enter Uber. The popular transportation company recently announced it is partnering with the Braves to make sure Banks can make it to every home game for the 2017 season.



*Banks greets fans at the final Braves game at Turner Field in October. Photo by [Hyosub Shin](mailto:hshin@ajc.com)*

Braves chairman Terry McGuirk and Uber Atlanta general manager Luke Marklin gave Banks the happy news during a tour of the new stadium, SunTrust Park, this fall.

“We’re opening up a new ballpark here, Walter,” McGuirk told him. “We wouldn’t even think about doing something here without you. You’re a very special guy.”

The Braves filmed a video of Banks touring the stadium and taking an Uber ride. Most riders hop in the back seat and fiddle on their phones in silence while the driver proceeds to the destination. Banks rode up front and chatted with his driver on the way.

“The Braves are an institution in Atlanta and Walter is a cornerstone of that institution,” Marklin said.

“I was so surprised,” Walter said of the Uber announcement. “You don’t take anything for granted.”

— Jennifer Brett

