

Going home to God

Death of dedicated minister Tennyson McCarty puzzles his family and friends



By John Moore, The Denver Post

God set a path for Tennyson McCarty's life, of that he had no doubt.

He was described as a furnace with a burning passion for Christ. A heat-seeking missile for the gospel. A master magician so charismatic, he could walk into a ghetto or a locker room and draw a crowd with only a deck of cards and his sheer magnetism.

The 6-foot-4, 240-pound former University of Colorado football player was the rare combination of power and purity, said his father, Dr. Cleveland McCarty. A statue built of iron, brother Somerset said.

McCarty helped found campus ministries at more than 300 colleges and high schools around the world. Last year alone, he toured 40 cities and ministered to an estimated quarter-million people.

God came into McCarty's life "and just invaded his

heart," former CU football coach Bill McCartney said. People were drawn to the Lord, the coach said, "because they were drawn to Tennyson."

It is now the burden of all those McCarty touched to grapple with why God's path for his tender warrior ended in a freezing creek near Peaceful Valley between Ward and Allenspark.

McCarty, an avid outdoorsman, hiked into the mountains to pray sometime during the week of Oct. 15. He never hiked out. The cause of death is believed to be hypothermia. He was 32.

Now his deeply faithful and prominent family, the woman he was to marry and the thousands he ministered to are confronting questions that may never be answered: Why did he go up into the mountains that day? Did he fall? Did he fall asleep?

Or was it just time for Tennyson to simply say, "I'm coming, Lord," wonders oldest brother Eric McCarty, who now likens Tennyson to Elijah, who knew when God would call him home.

But the questions are larger than the mystery of one death. They go to the mysteries of faith itself.

"People always say things happen for a reason, but this is a tough one," said McCarty's best friend, Brian Scaglia. "And I'll be honest with you: It's really hard to find a reason in all of this."

The family only asks all those wrestling with the same questions to focus on McCarty's life, and not how that life ended.

Sadness and celebration

That life was remembered Nov. 4 antithetically to the way it ended: in record-setting warmth. More than 1,000 crowded into Macky Auditorium on the CU campus, a

video image of the Boulder Flatirons, Tennyson's favorite place to pray, projected onto a huge screen.

Tennyson was the sixth of seven siblings born to dentist Cleveland McCarty and Jacquelyn McCarty, who died six years ago of a stroke.

"Thirty-two years ago, an escape artist climbed into the world," Tennyson's father said at his memorial. No sooner had Cleveland parked the car, he was being told, "It's a boy" - and a big one at that.

Young Tennyson was shaped by three introductions made by his father: the outdoors, magic and the Rev. Billy Graham.

Cleveland, the first man to scale all 54 of Colorado's 14,000-foot peaks in 54 days, biked and hiked with his kids. He also taught Tennyson magic. One particular card trick would perplex the boy for a decade — and the idea that what you see before you is often deception rather than reality would become the founding principle of his ministry, Eric said.

His dad also took Tennyson, then 12, to Graham's 1987 Mile High Stadium crusade. The boy called the event life-changing.

Growing up, the McCartys belonged to a Boulder Episcopal church, but Eric says each sibling went on to experience independent Christian epiphanies. At 15, Tennyson asked Christ into his life while attending a Christian magic show.

Eric, 10 years his elder, was a two-way CU football star from 1983-87 and a member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Today he is a surgeon, CU's director of sports medicine and travels with the football team.

Tennyson followed in both Eric's athletic and spiritual footsteps at CU. He became a scholar, youth minister and a four-year football letterman. He played in 42 games, highlighted by a game-winning catch against Texas A&M in 1995 that caught the attention of Sports Illustrated.

Tennyson idolized Eric, but as time went on, Eric said, "Tennyson became the encourager. He encouraged me spiritually, by his example. By the unselfish, pure and giving way that he lived his life."

His NFL dreams done in by injuries, Tennyson went on to earn his masters at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. In 2000, he teamed with Jim Munroe to form MAZE, a national traveling ministry that blends performance magic and the gospel.

Their razzle-dazzle approach "sought to convince high-school and college students who were lost that they were placing their trust in illusions of deceit and lies in the world," Eric said.

Tennyson looked forward to marrying Tracy Wilde next May, and embarking on his next MAZE tour. Now his family ponders all the good works he yet might have done.

"I struggle with that," said Eric. "But I guess he touched the people that he was supposed to touch. Tennyson gave so much to others, I'm not sure he had much left for himself."

On the day before McCarty hiked into the mountains, he sought out his friend Scaglia. They took a long walk to all their childhood haunts. The conversation became emotional. There were tears and hugs.

Eric now wonders why Tennyson sought out his best friend that day. Was it coincidence, he said, "or part of God's plan" that the meeting took place just before his death?

Some have speculated that Tennyson went into the mountains to take his life. The McCarty family does not see it that way. Eric said the sheriff's report does not point to any intentional act. There were no signs of self-infliction, no preliminary evidence he took drugs or medication. A coroner's report has not yet been released.

"I would hope people would not look at any one thing and say, 'That's what happened,' because we just don't know," Eric said. "There is and will always remain some mystery to all of this. But that's OK. There's so much more to remember about him than that."

There's the goofy kid who had official Nintendo T-shirts made that his pals had to wear if they wanted to play video games in his house. The football player who could flatten an opponent one moment and comfort him the next. The warrior who refused to quit his

senior season despite needing cortisone shots for his arthritic toes. The same college senior who became the legal guardian of a teenage boy.

There was the prankster who coaxed a pastor to announce Scaglia and his wife at their wedding as “Mr. and Mrs. Scagnutties.” The minister who “ate, breathed and slept the gospel,” Munroe said, who went to Louisiana to help out after Hurricane Katrina.

And there was the brother who flew to Chance McCarty’s side when he was on life support after a car accident “and had the whole plane praying for my healing,” Chance said through tears.

Tennyson would help anyone in need, Eric said, “and the fruits of his labor will be borne for generations to come.”

Not a question of faith

Eric admits that, yes, even a family that is Christian to the core also can be shaken to its core by such a sudden unexplainable loss.

“It’s a good thing we have a strong faith, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy,” Eric said. “Sure, there is sadness, grief, a great sense of loss for his physical presence. But there is also a great joy in knowing where he is now.

“But death is not a question of faith,” Eric said. “It’s a question of, ‘What can you take from the life Tennyson lived?’ “

His father takes away memories of a son who was ready to befriend anyone.

“We ask you not to labor at Tennyson’s departure, but take heart and rejoice that he touched so many others, and that one man can affect so many in a humble, joyful, sometimes playful way and leave the world a better place,” Cleveland said at the memorial.

Whether or not you believe, Scaglia said, “The Bible is a series of stories about ordinary people with very real problems and struggles and pain. And the common thread among all these people is that at one point they just say, ‘God, here I am.’ And God takes their lives and makes them extraordinary for his glory.

“I believe that’s what happened to Tennyson.”

Eric hopes everyone can make peace with that.

“It’s almost like he just knew it was his time to go, like he knew something we didn’t,” Eric said. “Elijah knew that God was going to take him. Elijah told Elisha that he would be taken from him. And then, all of a sudden, he was swooped up by a chariot of fire and taken into heaven.

“We can’t judge God. And Tennyson didn’t judge others. So don’t judge Tennyson.”

A week before his death, Tennyson visited his lone sister, April Shores, in Virginia.

“On the day we learned about Tenny’s death, I found out that I am having another boy,” she said. And on the day of his funeral, she added, “I felt a peace that it was not Tennyson who decided his fate, but God.”

Brother Conrad believes, “It was a higher power that called him to the hills that day.”

Whatever the reason, Chance added, if Tennyson were here today, he would say, “My life was worth it. It was worth giving up a different career, money and worldly things, to live for Christ.”

Tennyson was a master magician, and Eric believes that, in a way, his brother simply did what magicians do: He disappeared. No one knows how he did it.

And, Eric said, “Maybe we’re not supposed to know the secret.”