

Burger's Homecoming

Todd Fletcher, a senior executive director for Life Care in the State of Washington, was preparing for bed Wednesday evening. He had just received a new DVD that he had ordered – one of the Gaither Homecoming series about a concert in Canada – and had begun to play it. He was particularly focused on the performance of Anthony Burger, the featured pianist in the Homecoming productions, when the telephone rang. He put the DVD on pause, with the picture of Burger frozen on the screen of his television set.

About that time, Fletcher's daughter, Annie, 11, walked into the room, pointed to the picture on the screen and declared, "Mommy said he just died." That, Fletcher related, "was a horrible thing" to hear, and an amazing coincidence.

Meanwhile, his first cousin, Kevin Fletcher, the executive director at Life Care Center of Puyallup, was also shocked to hear the news – and for another reason that affected his staff. His activity director, Linda Nicholson, is on the Gaither Homecoming Cruise, along with Burger and the rest of the Homecoming family. She had been excited for a year or more about the cruise and her plans to go. It was reported that Burger was playing the piano when he had a heart attack and died.

Burger was well-known and highly regarded by the Life Care family. He had performed during two annual management meetings – 2002 and again in 2003 on a bill shared with violinist Jaime Jorge – at the Conn Center of Lee University. The community was invited to both concerts. Anthony was a lifelong friend of Forrest Preston and me.

The story of Anthony Burger is a miraculous one of great talent, dedication and a special touch of God that allowed him to overcome a tragedy early in his life. Evidently, God intended to use Anthony to produce heartwarming, inspirational music, and He would not allow an accident to deter His will.

At the tender age of 8 months, Anthony was using a walker, and a wheel became lodged in a furnace grate. The walker tipped over, and Anthony fell onto the hot grate, causing third-degree burns on his face, legs and both of his hands. "I was carried on a pillow for a year, and during that time I received three medicated baths a day for my hands," he recalled. "The doctors said I'd never be able to move them after that." Despite the forecasts, his hands healed, and Anthony credited the result to God's grace. "It's amazing what the Lord can do and how we can overcome battles in our lives. Here I am when the doctors told me I would never be able to use my hands, and now that's all I do – use my hands to play the piano."

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He began playing at the age of 3. "The first song I ever played on the piano was *The Old Rugged Cross*. While growing up in Cleveland, he attended Bellefonte Baptist Church. He got his start performing with gospel quartets when he joined the Gospelairens, a local group made up of Glen and Ralph Davis, Quinton Goins and Bob Reffner. His first recording was with that group. The Davises are brothers of Margaret Pardue, wife of Life Care's Joe Pardue, who headed our Graphic Services Department for years and is now in charge of special projects for Life Care.

Anthony went on to join The Kingsmen, a gospel group, when he was a senior in high school. A flood of awards and personal honors began to flow. He received the *Singing News Magazine's* Favorite Musician Award for 10 consecutive years. The magazine decided no one else was going to win it, so it named the annual presentation the Anthony Burger Award so it could be presented to others. Other examples included *People's Choice* Best Instrumentalist by the Southern Gospel Music Association for four consecutive years, the *Gospel Voice Magazine's* Instrumentalist Award in 1991, the *Singing News* five-star rating for *Precious Memories*, the only instrumental album to receive its "extraordinary" rating, and the Hearts Aflame Award for Instrumentalist of the Year in 1995.

After 15 years with The Kingsmen, Burger began doing concerts on his own, in addition to his work with the Gaithers. In 2000, Anthony was inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame.

For Anthony, as his time came, there could have been no better transition from earth to Heaven than doing what was the passion of his life – playing on the piano songs about Christ in the company of his gospel music family.

--Beecher Hunter