

Putting Ghosts to Rest

In Vietnam, War Widow Exercises Three Decades Of Guilt

Story by R. R. Keene • Photos courtesy of Kathy Upchurch

"Kathy, you're a Marine officer's wife. You will always hold that chin up. And if anything happens, you're going to have to do it all. There'll be no tears in front of the family."

Dong Koi Mountain is one of those places where the Vietnamese do not go. It does not appear any more or less foreboding than neighboring Dong Ha Mountain and the surrounding hills of what was once Northern I Corps along the old Demilitarized Zone. But the local inhabitants believe it is haunted with the souls of unrested spirits.

As a rule, combat veterans don't put much stock in ghost stories, usually dismissing such tales as products of overactive imaginations. But every once in a while, someone will tell them of something unusual which causes them to pause. Dong Koi is one such exception.

Twenty-five years after Reserve Second Lieutenant James Glenn "Jimmy" Upchurch made the ultimate sacrifice on that mountain, his widow, Kathy, stood at its foot, trying unsuccessfully to find

someone to take her up on a tour. With her was Ed Henry, a former Navy corpsman who served with the Seventh Marine Regiment at Chu Lai and who is now a guide in Vietnam with Military Historical Tours of Alexandria, Va.

"We're not allowed in that area," he told her gently, as they looked up the ridge line. "It's an ancestral area the Vietnamese don't want disturbed."

Their Vietnamese guide was less tactful. When he was asked to lead them up the ridge, his reply was a firm, "No!"

So Kathy Upchurch stood at the foot of Dong Koi Mountain and prayed.

She had been an 18-year-old college freshman when, on a blind date, she met her future husband, an upperclassman who played football for East Central State University in Ada, Okla. Jim Upchurch looked like the all-conference



tackle that he was: broad-shouldered, full of youthful power and confidence and well-liked, but also a natural leader.

"He had a boy's sense of humor, direct with an easy laugh. And we became best friends," she said. "He was the first person in my life to ever fight for me," she added softly, without elaborating. He proposed on St. Valentine's Day 1965, and they were married in June. Not quite two years later, he received his draft notice on Jan. 28, 1967, his 23rd birthday.

"Things were such then that he could have gotten a waiver, but he wasn't going to do that. His grandfather had been a Marine," Kathy said. She remembers the day when Jim and his friend, Larry Beck, came through the door and said in unison, "Guess what we did today?" They had signed up for Officer Candidates School.



Above: Lt Upchurch (right) posed with members of 2/9, who were in eight major operations in five months, including Dewey Canyon.

Left: Dong Koi Mountain, the farthest peak on the right, is where 2d Lt James Upchurch was killed.

She still can hear that refrain today, tolling like a prophetic chorus, for both would die in Vietnam. "Guess what we did today?"

Second Lieutenant Upchurch's Basic School class graduated in August 1968, and by September he had orders to the Republic of South Vietnam. The couple had a month's leave to prepare for the separation.

Kathy had been teaching school while Jim attended OCS and TBS at Quantico, Va. They returned to his father's resort in Graford, Texas, where she would work as a back-up fry cook, cabin cleaner, boat worker and wait while Jim did his 13-month tour.

He wanted to make the Corps a career, and she really wanted to have children. But decisions on both would have to wait. After Vietnam, there would be plenty of time for such things.

"I want to be buried in Lubbock, and here's who I want as pallbearers," Jim said out of the blue one night. He had pulled the car over to the side of the road and was calm when he spoke, but his statement had come without preamble. It was two days before he was to leave, and they were returning home from a party. It was too dark in the car for Kathy to see his face, but as he talked, she felt herself flush with fear, anger and confusion.

"Jim, why are you saying this?" She could feel tears welling up. "You're not going to be a hero or do anything to get hurt?"

"Kathy, you're a Marine officer's wife. You will always hold that chin up. And if anything happens, you're going to have to do it all," he said. "There'll be

no tears in front of the family."

She thought about that as their car's headlights guided the way down a lonely ribbon of Texas road. She remembered it again when he left for Vietnam.

On the war front

Vietnam in late 1968 was a time when the warring parties reassessed their strategies. The Third Marine Division launched a series of mobile fire base operations along South Vietnam's northern border area. The Americans, however, had come to realize that there was a limit to their participation in what had turned out to be America's longest war. The Corps, according to one Marine general, had "adopted the idea that we were in the postwar period."

Maybe, but there was still a lot of killing to be done. Second Lieutenant Upchurch found himself commanding 2d Platoon of "Echo" Company, 2d Battalion, Ninth Marine Regiment, 3d MarDiv, in what was then Quang Tri Province. He considered himself lucky, as his platoon sergeant, Douglas "Mack" McConnell, was considered to be one of the best. They hit it off and became friends in a situation where friendship is not easily earned nor quickly given. Kathy recalled Jim's letters speaking in glowing terms of Mack.

In fact, the whole platoon seemed to take to their new lieutenant. Kathy received a Christmas letter from an anonymous member of his platoon, that read, in part: "We feel he is one of the best lieutenants ever.... He works with and for us. He takes great interest in our personal health and welfare. We are fortunate in having such a good lieutenant.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

April 24, 1969

Dear Mrs. Upchurch:

It is with great sorrow that I have learned of the death of your husband, Second Lieutenant James G. Upchurch.

Of all the hardships of war, the cruellest are the losses of men such as your husband. The only consolation I can offer is the profound respect of the nation he died to serve, and the humble recognition of a sacrifice no man can measure and no words can describe. Those who give their own lives to make the freedom of others possible live forever in honor.

Mrs. Nixon joins me in extending our own sympathy and in expressing the sympathy of a saddened nation. You will be in our prayers and in our hearts.

Sincerely,



Mrs. James G. Upchurch
Willow Beach Resort, Star Route
Graford, Texas

Four days after his death, Jim's last letter to her arrived. In it he expressed disappointment with her for wanting to move their planned R&R dates back. "Is teaching more important than me?" he'd asked. She was devastated by yet another powerful emotion: guilt.

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On the other hand, he is fortunate in having a thoughtful wife who remembers us peons at Christmas." (The latter is a reference to Christmas and other care packages she regularly sent to the platoon with notes of encouragement.)

More importantly, Lt Upchurch proved to be a quick study and fast learner, essential traits in combat. In five months, he participated in eight major combat operations including Dewey Canyon.

Operation Dewey Canyon took place in January 1969 in the Ashau Valley, an infamous North Vietnamese Army supply route. With the slap of AK47 bullets overhead and the "krumph" of incoming mortar rounds forcing 2d Plt to hunker down into the red clay, Lt Upchurch coordinated supporting-arms fire with cool skill and quiet confidence. He ordered a counterattack toward the heaviest point of contact, suffering casualties. The enemy soon took flight.

The young platoon commander was proving to be as tenacious as he was courageous. Later in February, one of

his squads sprung a nasty ambush that killed those unlucky enough to be walking point for a large NVA force.

Pressing his advantage, Lt Upchurch and a fire team reinforced the ambush squad, and then he led the combined group in a vigorous assault. He was out front throwing grenades and firing his .45-caliber pistol. The NVA, bloodied and surprised, fell back. Later in February, Echo Co took on an NVA unit that was heavily armed with automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenades. Upchurch deployed his platoon to ensure that all avenues of approach to their position were covered. When the shooting became heavy and the confusion of combat ensued, he stood exposed to heavy hostile fire and pointed out targets to his machine-gun squad.

Nobody in the platoon doubted their lieutenant's courage. Yet he confided in his letters to Kathy, "I'm scared every day."

He also wrote of his concern for his fellow Marines and the fact that there were so many 18-year-olds. In one of his last letters, he wrote: "I really do believe there is a God, and I'm not afraid to die."

On the home front

On March 25, Kathy had a dream that Jim was killed in combat. It upset her because she had recently written to him, asking to postpone for a month their planned rest and relaxation rendezvous in Hawaii due to a potential teaching job. She had been notified that the R&R dates had changed, but Jim hadn't yet replied.

They came to her door at 8 a.m., March 27. One was a Marine captain who was the recruiting officer out of Fort Worth. He was wearing the yellow-and-green and white-and-green ribbons that told her that he was also a Vietnam veteran.

Kathy saw them, and though she knew why they had come, she asked: "Is he a prisoner of war or missing in action?"

The Marine captain with the ribbons from Vietnam said, "No."

She told them, "You'd better come inside."

"I was in jeans when they told me. I remember that and remember saying to them: 'But he wasn't supposed to be there! We have our R&R planned. This can't be. This is not happening. This couldn't have happened to Jim. God wouldn't do this.'"

In a flush of painful emotion, it all ran in her mind. Their times together, his face, snapshot memories, trying to picture him again. Things only they knew. Then she remembered his words: "Kathy, you're a Marine officer's wife. If anything happens, you're going to have to do it all." She began to regain her control.

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Picking up the pieces

Jim had been an only child, and now there would be no children. Their marriage had lasted only three years and nine months. "It wasn't fair," she thought, and she was right.

And, certainly, nothing that followed seemed right.

Kathy had become close to Jim's father (his mother was deceased), and she called him first. "I lost Jim," she said. His father fell apart. As time went by, they drifted apart. The elder Mr. Upchurch became passive, then bitter and threw himself into his work. She would see him only a few more times before he died in 1988.

For Kathy, Jim's death initially was met with denial.

But there was another setback. Four days after his death, Jim's last letter to her arrived. In it he expressed disappointment with her for wanting to move their planned R&R dates back. "Is teaching more important than me?" he'd asked. She was devastated by yet another powerful emotion: guilt.

At the funeral she remembered his admonition: "There'll be no tears in front of the family." And there were none. But there was no closure either, she said, explaining that it was, of course, a closed-casket funeral. "If I could have just seen a hand or something."

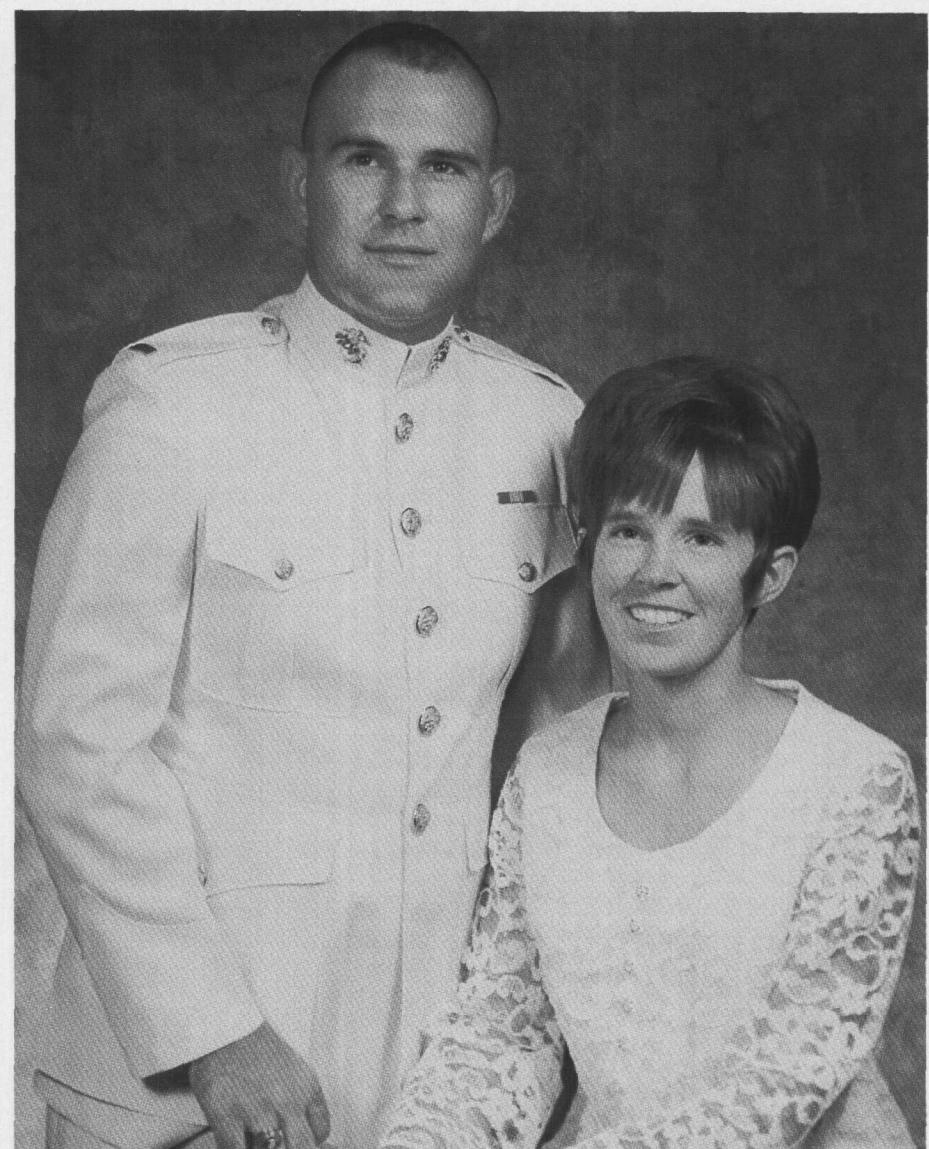
Kathy later learned the details of how her husband died in a letter from Sgt Mack, written May 1, 1969, at Quang Tri. "Dear Mrs. Upchurch, I'm sorry I've been so long in answering the letter you addressed to our platoon. I was your husband's platoon sergeant, and I like to consider myself also as one of his friends.... I'm sure I can speak for all of the platoon when I say we share your loss of not only a damn good platoon commander, but also a fine human being. The rapport he established was one of the finest I've seen in my career.

"You asked for details surrounding your husband's death.... I'll try to tell you.

"The NVA had been hitting Route 9 with mortars and sniper fire. The battalion had wanted the 2d and 3d platoons of Echo and two platoons of Fox Co to sweep the hills and clear the enemy....

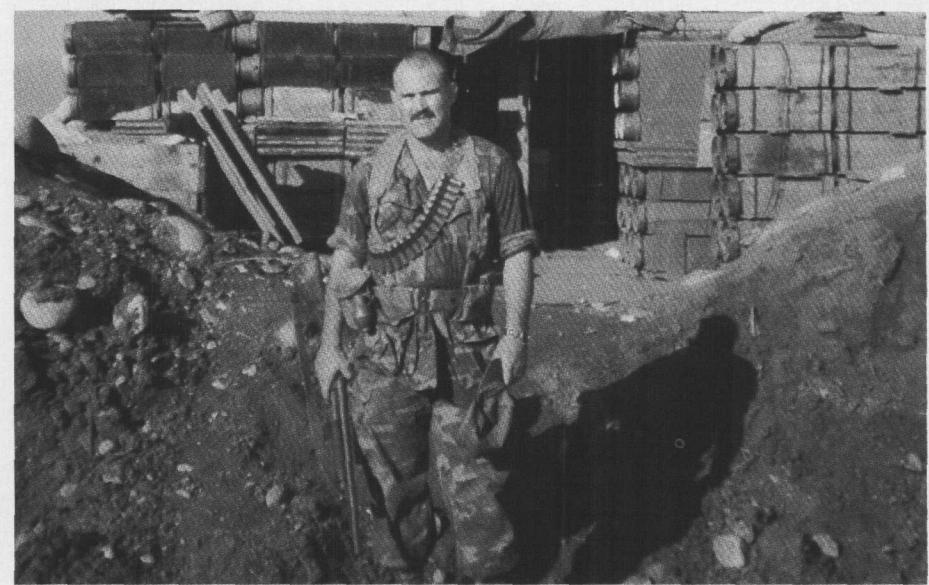
"It was decided that the lieutenant would take the 'company minus' as the company commander, a job we all felt he was well qualified to do. I was to take over his job as the 2d Platoon commander.

"We had seen signs of the enemy, but it appeared that he was leaving the area. The company felt that it would be an uneventful operation, including the lieutenant. We all felt we were in good hands while 'Mr. Upchurch' was in charge.



Above: They met on a blind date, he proposed on St. Valentine's Day 1965, and they married that June. He received his draft notice in January 1967 and went to Vietnam in late 1968.

Below: In Vietnam, 2d Lt Upchurch proved to be a quick study, a tenacious leader, and nobody in his platoon doubted his courage.



Former EC Player, Jimmy Upchurch, Dies In Vietnam

A former East Central student, Jimmy Upchurch, 25, was killed Tuesday by enemy action in South Vietnam.

Upchurch, a Marine 2nd Lt., was a platoon leader and was on patrol when he was fatally injured in a mortar blast.

Upchurch was a member of the East Central football team, playing three years as right tackle. His last season was the fall of 1966. He graduated from East Central in the spring of 1967.

Lt. Upchurch is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Upchurch. His father operates a resort on the Possum Kingdom Lake in Texas. Mr. Upchurch is the brother of Mrs. Tom Boatwright, Ada.

Lt. Upchurch is survived by his wife, the former Kathy Swearingen, Del City. She too is an East Central graduate. His body will be returned to Lt. Upchurch was in charge of swimming facilities at Win-



JIM UPCHURCH

Local Marine Officer Is Killed In Vietnam

Marine 2nd Lt. James G. Upchurch, 25, husband of Mrs. Kathy Upchurch, Star Route, Graford, was killed in action in Vietnam on March 25, it was learned today.

Lieutenant Upchurch reportedly was struck by mortar fire while serving with the 3rd Marine Division in Vietnam.

He had served with the Marines for approximately 18 months.

Lieutenant Upchurch is a native of Lubbock and was graduated from Monterey High School in Lubbock, and received a degree from East

Central State College at Ada, Oklahoma.

He played football in both high school and college.

Besides his widow, he is survived by his father, Glenn Upchurch; and step-mother, Mrs. Lynda Upchurch.

Mr. and Mrs. Upchurch own Willow Beach Resort, Possum Kingdom Lake, and the young officer's wife has been staying there with his parents during his tour of duty in Vietnam.

Funeral arrangements are pending upon arrival of the body from Vietnam. The funeral will be held in Lubbock following the arrival of the body.

Jim Upchurch was an all-conference tackle at his college and well-known in his Texas hometown of Lubbock. These are only a few of the clippings surrounding her husband's death which Kathy Upchurch kept in a scrapbook for Jim's father.

"The next day, the 3d Platoon was moving out first, and the command post and mortars [the lieutenant's group] were going to be moving up with the 2d Platoon. It was at this time the enemy first opened up with automatic weapons on the column. They were on our objective and on another hill to the right from which we were taking automatic and machine-gun fire. Just before we made the assault the lieutenant told me, 'Give 'em hell, Sgt Mack.' It was his platoon, and I knew he was wishing he could make that assault with us. It was what he had been training us for so long.

"Well, we took the hill without a friendly casualty. He was really proud of us. I was talking on the radio with him, and he had maneuvered the 'company

minus' into taking both the objective and the other hill. He told me that the enemy was on the run and was going into Fox Company's blocking force.

"We then set in and were preparing to take a break. We could see Mr. Upchurch and his radio operator on the hill to our left. Then it happened.

"The enemy started dropping mortars on the hill the lieutenant was on. The first round they fired was too far over the target they had picked. We, the 2d Platoon, could see it hit and tried to tell them by radio to take cover, for it seems they didn't see it. However the enemy had 'keyed out' our radio frequency, and we had no communication with them.

"The next round was only a moment later, and we could see it had hit our

lieutenant and his radio operator [who would survive]. Then the enemy started dropping mortar rounds all over their hill which we had just taken. The corpsman was right there to help, but Mr. Upchurch had been slain immediately.... We were able to get the killed and wounded out by chopper.

"War, Mrs. Upchurch, is a horrible nightmare. It makes old men out of young boys. I saw some of those 'old men' in the lieutenant's platoon crying that day. There is no doubt that they had lost a platoon commander [whom] they loved as a leader and as a man.... The loss of our lieutenant is one we cannot or will not forget.... We all share your grief for the loss of one we all admired and respected. We will always be proud to say we served under him.

"Most of the old platoon is gone now. There are only about 10 of us left. Some have gone home, some have been wounded, some died, but those who have gone carry the memory of their lieutenant and the fine things he did for them as a platoon and as individuals.

"We all suffer losses in these hard times. All I can say after, is the way I've found to help ease some of the pain I've encountered, is faith in God through prayer. I'll close for now.

"My deepest regret, Sgt Mack."

She never heard from Sgt Mack again.

For the next few weeks and months, she listened to people offering sympathy as she wrapped things up. She had come to the conclusion that the Marines had handled things badly, from sending an officer who was inexperienced in casualty assistance to shipping her husband's body in what she believed was a less-than-timely fashion. "Jim's death and what was happening to me: It all just wasn't real.

"It came home to me when his personal effects arrived. His wedding ring and a crucifix were the first things I saw, and I knew it was final." She wept alone.

She had their wedding bands made into a ring which she kept and made a scrapbook for Jim's father that included his Purple Heart and two Bronze Star citations. "I threw away Jim's letters because I didn't have a child to pass them off to." Then, she tried to start over.

However, one thought lingered. "Is teaching more important than me?" And each time she heard his words, she always answered, "If I hadn't asked for the R&R date to change, he'd still be alive."

It haunted her. She went back to school and earned a master's degree in physical education. Then she wanted to be a nurse, but ended up teaching public school in Springfield, Va. She dated a few military

men and four years later remarried. That marriage lasted six years.

"If I hadn't asked for the R&R date to change, he'd still be alive," she kept thinking. Looking back, Kathy said that it was that thought, more often than not, that sabotaged her relationships with others. Depression set in.

"I was becoming an A-number-1 b----, who needed to see a shrink." She did, and he suggested that she visit Vietnam. She also discovered the Gold Star Wives of America Inc., a nonprofit national military widows' service organization that took its name from an old custom in World War II. Families of those serving in the military back then were issued "Blue Star" flags, which were proudly displayed in their windows while they waited for a loved one to return from the war. Sometimes the wait was in vain, and the family replaced the blue flag with a Gold Star flag signifying a member of their family had been killed in action. In this group, Kathy found others who understood how she felt. It was a combination of friends, old and new, who encouraged her to bring things to closure in a journey to Vietnam.

In 1994, on what would have been Kathy and Jim Upchurch's 29th wedding anniversary, she arrived in Hanoi. A few days later, with maps provided by Marines who had known her husband, she was near the 17th Parallel at the foot of Dong Koi Mountain, looking up toward where her husband had been killed.

Kathy chose a sapling and hung a small wooden folk angel on it to appraise the spirits and in remembrance of not only Jim, but of all who fought and died there.

"I really believe that I heard Jim's voice, and he told me: 'I am at peace. We all are at peace. I knew you would come, for God and I have been guiding you.... It is now time for you to be at peace.' "

"I didn't hear anything," said guide Ed Henry, "but I'll tell you what. It was like being in a bad place. The Vietnamese guides just left. While we were there, I got a feeling of something not being right, sort of like just before an ambush we once walked into near Chu Lai. It was like we were surrounded by people watching us. It was just spooky."

Whether or not Jim spoke to her does



Former Navy corpsman Ed Henry (left), now with Military Historical Tours of Alexandria, Va., helped Kathy Upchurch (center) on her trip to Dong Koi Mountain 25 years after her husband's death. Afterward she was toasted by the mayor of Hue City (second from left) and his secretary for having the courage to come to Vietnam and see where her husband was killed.

not really matter to anyone but Kathy Upchurch. For her, the trip was a catharsis, purging most of her emotional demons. "I thank God for letting me go to Vietnam. The pain which had been deeply buried all came to the surface.

"I realized that Jim died doing what he wanted to do. He wanted to go serve and be who he was. I had to face up to that," she said.

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the surface."**

She also came to grips with her feelings about the Corps.

"I had a love-hate relationship with the Marine Corps. You love the strength and leadership and the good it instills in Marines. I hated it because back then, it didn't seem to value the family enough. But there isn't a Marine I've ever met who wasn't protective of me."

She returned to Vietnam again in

March of 1998 because she discovered that she liked the country and its people. While there, the mayor of Dong Ha, hearing that she was a war widow, told her, "I am sorry about your husband. I served in Dong Ha. I wish you happiness, long life and good health." A teacher, Mrs. Ng Thi Cam Hong, also asked her, "Do you hate us?"

The question brought Kathy Upchurch to tears. "Hate had never entered my heart concerning the Vietnamese people. I was raised in the Christian belief that unconditional love was a better method of solving problems. Anger, yes; hatred, no."

She looked in the direction of the mountain where her husband had been killed so many years ago. "Climbing that mountain isn't important anymore," she said. "I've learned that life is an ongoing process, and you have to roll with it, and maybe I'm supposed to help someone else get through hard times."

While she still thinks now and then of the man she has loved for so long, she admitted that it is sometimes difficult to remember Jim's smile, laughter and brown eyes.

"How dark brown they were," she whispered and wished she had never thrown his letters away.

