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A life unfinished: Writer's demons overtook her art

By JIM AUCHMUTEY
jauchmutey@ajc.com

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Georgian Jeanne Braselton was one of the South's most promising new writers.

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A life unfinished

Writer's demons overtook her art
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, May 18, 2003
By Jim Auchmutey

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She still seemed on track as recently as February, when she appeared at the South Carolina Book Festival with two of her writing confidantes, Kaye Gibbons and Lee Smith, both acclaimed novelists from North Carolina. The trio were billed as the Dixie Chicks.

Gibbons, who accompanied Braselton on her first publicity tour, liked to introduce her at signings by saying, "She's not a one-book wonder."

Considering the turmoil and tragedy in her life, the wonder may have been that she was able to create at all.

Jeanne Braselton was almost anointed to write.

"When she was a baby, her father prayed that she would love books," says her adoptive mother, Rosalee Ingram. "I used to tell her she overdid it."

Ingram is waiting in a car outside the white frame farmhouse where her daughter lived on the outskirts of Rome. She died without a will, leaving her 84-year-old mother to handle her affairs, including the disposition of her unfinished novel.

While a nephew runs inside to fetch some of Jeanne's things, Ingram pulls out a grocery bag full of mementoes --- snapshots, birthday cards, high school compositions penned in a girlish, flowing script --- and shares them with a wan

smile. Rain begins to pelt the windshield, and the view of two empty Adirondack chairs in the yard dissolves into liquid.

Jeanne was born to an unwed teenage mother and adopted by the Ingrams when she was 3 days old. They brought her up in Rossville, across the state line from Chattanooga, and reared her in their respective passions.

Rosalee Ingram took her to a Pentecostal church and was thankful when she put her piano lessons to sacred purpose in a gospel group. Charles Ingram, her father, was a machinist by trade but a wordsmith by heart. Part Cherokee, he wrote and self-published poetry about the highlands that had once been Indian country. Jeanne learned to appreciate the rhythm of words as a girl, typing his verse on a manual Remington she could barely reach on a bedroom dresser. She keyed her own words later, as a teenager, getting 20-odd pages into a romance novel she called "Dark Mansions."

An excellent student, Jeanne won a partial scholarship to Berry College in Rome. Away from home, she drifted from the church and remade herself as a wisecracking bohemian. She edited the yearbook and worked on the student newspaper, impressing her friends with all-night working jags and an omnivorous appetite for reading.

"A lot of us saw her as larger than life," remembers one of her roommates, Jim Smith, now an English professor at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah. "She wanted to be an artist and an intellectual, and she pursued them hotly."

After graduation in 1983, Jeanne took a job with the Rome News-Tribune. She earned a reputation for well-turned feature stories typed superhumanly fast, the clacking keys punctuated by a hearty laugh that sounded like a shotgun going off in the newsroom. Eventually, she became city editor.

She continued to read hungrily and kept trying her hand at fiction. But her literary ambitions didn't gel until she met a kindred soul twice her age who reminded everyone of her daddy.

Al Braselton was a character. Literally.

As a young advertising man in Atlanta during the early '60s, he had befriended James Dickey, a copywriter who was beginning to win recognition for his poetry. They took several canoeing trips to North Georgia with another advertising pal, adventures that Dickey transmogrified into "Deliverance," his classic tale of suburbanites who get into serious trouble in the wilderness. He co-dedicated the book to Braselton and used him as the model for Drew, the gentle guitarist who dies on the river. Al was flattered --- and relieved that he wasn't the guy who's forced to squeal like a pig.

When Jeanne met him, Al was wandering in from a wilderness of his own. His first marriage failed after his son killed himself. After years of heavy drinking, he left Atlanta for a monastery in Kentucky to dry out and try to find some serenity. He retired from business and returned to his native Rome to write poetry.

He spied Jeanne at the library over a stack of Wallace Stevens volumes. They married in 1987.

The Braseltons made a memorable couple --- loud, opinionated, funny, moody. Al was bald and scrawny, with a scant graying beard; Jeanne tended toward plumpness and wore her big coif in varying shades of strawberry. They lived in the old farmhouse he had grown up in and filled it with dogs and cats and trails of reading material that seemed to spread like summer vines.

"They were easily the worst housekeepers ever known," laughs George de Man, a Rome News-Tribune reporter who hung out with them.

The Braseltons regarded the art of language as something akin to religion. They loved going to literary gatherings and meeting authors. On top of his computer, for inspiration, Al kept an olive pit that he said had been spit out by the revered Eudora Welty. Their home became something of a literary salon, Al and Jeanne

holding forth for hours as clouds of smoke collected from the Carlton menthol 100s she was always puffing.

"We'd sit on that back porch and talk about everything," de Man says. "Jeanne would bring out some candles, and we'd let the night descend on us until all that was left was our voices and the darkness."

Jeanne was the one who had to go to work in the morning. When she left the newspaper, she took a marketing job at a local bank, Citizens First. She made time for writing late at night. When she enrolled in a creative writing class at Berry in 1998, the instructor, Georgia novelist Mary Hood, was impressed. "Jeanne was already an accomplished writer."

She showed Hood part of a darkly comic novel she had started. It was the first-person story of a middle-aged woman who had hoped that marriage would be as bright and cheerful as the pages of *Southern Living*. After a miscarriage, the character grows disillusioned and begins to entertain morbid fantasies about her husband, a responsible and boring banker. The first sentence was guaranteed to stir the dip bowl at book clubs:

"I was married 11 years before I started imagining how different life could be if my husband were dead."

Al loved it.

Then, strangely, he almost died. In the fall of 1998, Al suffered a heart attack and underwent a quadruple bypass. Doctors later discovered an aortic aneurysm that could burst without warning. Surgery could prove fatal. Rather than risk it, Al, barely into his 60s, accepted a provisional death sentence.

Such a turn of fate would tax any spouse's sense of well-being. In this case, the stakes were higher.

Jeanne had known for years that she was manic-depressive. She talked about it openly, about the ever-shifting medications her doctors prescribed and about the psychologist she was so fond of that she lists him in the acknowledgments of her book.

At the bank where she worked for almost a decade, colleagues learned to read her ups and downs.

"She could crank out amazing amounts of work in a short period of time --- technical stuff --- and then she had to rest for a few days," says Citizens First President Roger Smith. "But we could see her changing. As her illness progressed, it became harder for her to keep a regular schedule."

Manic depression, or bipolar disorder, strikes one in 100 people. In its more severe forms, it can be an emotional whipsaw, a destructive cycle of hyperactive highs and can't-get-out-of-bed lows. It can be treated with lithium and other medications, but the diagnosis and drug therapy are notoriously tricky.

The condition seems to occur far more often among writers and artists. In "Touched With Fire," her 1993 book on creativity and mood disorders, psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison suggests that bipolar personalities are more likely to gravitate to the arts. Some writers learn to use their manic peaks as times of extraordinary production. Some succumb to the corresponding low periods, as the suicides of Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf and many others attest.

Braselton found a writer who understood what she was going through in Kaye Gibbons, the best-selling novelist from Raleigh. They met during a conference at Berry. Gibbons, who has written and talked widely about her own struggles with depression, took Braselton under her wing and helped nurture "False Sense" along. They developed an intense friendship complete with nicknames --- Kaye was Helen Keller, Jeanne was Anne Frank.

"I could see what writing was doing for her self-worth," Gibbons says.

But there were times when the illness made work difficult, if not impossible.

Once, Mary Hood remembers, when Braselton had missed her class for a week, she passed a strange woman sitting on the front steps of the building smoking.

Hood didn't recognize her at first. "She seemed like an old woman in trouble, a hobo of a woman blown in from the storm," she says.

Hood was concerned and sat down beside her. As they spoke, she finally placed Braselton's depression-fogged voice --- like actress Lauren Bacall "doing Dixie in slow motion" --- and she was struck by the courage it took for her merely to show up in such a state.

"Even in the absolute bottom of the pit," Hood says, "Jeanne knew the only way out for her was writing."

With recommendations from Gibbons and other authors like Terry Kay and Anne Rivers Siddons, Braselton signed a book deal with Ballantine and quit the bank. "False Sense" came out in September 2001 to good reviews ("small-town charm with major-league angst," the Los Angeles Times said) and remarkably brisk sales for a first novel --- almost 100,000 copies in hardback and trade paperback.

But it was a bittersweet success. Al's health was failing. Jeanne would travel to signings and book fairs and purr to the strokes of approval, and then return to her ailing, housebound husband. It was as if her life were mimicking the mood swings of her sickness.

That November, Al collapsed and had to be hospitalized. Gibbons dropped everything and went to Jeanne. "I drove all night to Rome and stayed until I thought the chaos had settled into order enough for me to go home," she recalls in an e-mail. "It never really did."

On the morning of Feb. 21, 2002, Jeanne woke to find her mate of 15 years dead. "Dueling Banjos" was played at the funeral and he was buried on a hillside overlooking the Coosa River, under a tombstone that says: "Friend of Poets."

Three weeks later, when she accepted the award for best first novel at the Georgia Author of the Year ceremonies in Macon, no one had to ask why Jeanne Braselton was crying.

The grieving was worse than she had ever imagined. After a month of numbness, she went back to work on her second novel, another autobiographical story she called "The Other Side of Air." Without Al, the solitude of her chosen profession seemed more daunting.

"She told me that writing was such a lonely business," says her birth mother, Joyce Parsons, who reconnected with Jeanne after she had grown up. "We talked all the time, and I'd tell her to get out of that house because she was just getting bored and depressed. Jeannie was outgoing. She needed people."

But she also needed to finish the manuscript. Braselton was deeply in debt, from medical bills and her own manic shopping sprees, and needed to fulfill her contract for practical as well as creative reasons.

She wrote in torrents in the middle of the night, sometimes in bed, sometimes sitting in an easy chair with Edna Earl, a stray cat she had taken in, perched on her shoulder like a parrot. Al's guitar was propped on the mantelpiece.

"She was excited about the book. I think it was the only thing that kept her going," says her friend Jon Hershey, an English professor at Floyd College in Rome, who read eight chapters.

Braselton turned in a first draft to Ballantine last year. Her editor, Maureen O'Neal, thought it was good but needed extensive reworking to tighten the plot tension. Braselton launched into revisions, feeling pressured because she had already missed deadlines and wasn't sure how she was going to end the revamped story. She promised a completed manuscript by the end of April.

First, however, she wanted to rid herself of a chemical distraction that she believed was clouding her mind. She told friends and relatives that she had become dependent on a prescription drug.

The trouble started toward the end of Al's life, when his arthritis became so bad he had to stop picking guitar. Doctors prescribed the painkiller OxyContin. Friends

say Jeanne got a prescription, too, for her persistent migraines, though they can't say from whom.

OxyContin contains a synthetic opiate that can cause dependence in many people and physical addiction in some. The drug swept through rural America in recent years as users discovered they could crush the pills and short-circuit the time release action to experience a powerful rush --- hence its nickname, "hillbilly heroin."

Jeanne wasn't using oxy that way, friends say, but she came to see it, even properly taken, as a dangerous substance. She blamed it for Al's death and was taking steps to join a class action lawsuit against the pharmaceutical company that makes the medication. A week before Christmas, she posted a message on an Internet support site --- oxyabusekills.com --- saying that Al had died of an accidental overdose. "OxyContin killed my husband, and I've lost the love of my life," she wrote.

In March, Jeanne decided to quit OxyContin cold turkey. It was a week of unmitigated hell --- cramps, headaches, gastrointestinal revolt --- but she seemed to come out of it clean.

"We were proud of her," says her mother, Rosalee Ingram, who visited for a few days after the storm had broken.

Now her loved ones wonder whether Braselton had really beaten oxy, or whether the struggle drained her psychic reserves and left her unusually vulnerable to the next depressive cycle. Indeed, her family has contacted a lawyer to explore whether there are grounds for a lawsuit.

The inevitable depression returned during the last week of March. One afternoon Braselton called her newspaper friend George de Man and threatened to take her life.

"I'd never heard her use the S-word before," says de Man, who rushed to her house and stayed for hours until she seemed calm. He talked to her again before he left town for the weekend, and thought she sounded fine.

Early that Saturday evening, Braselton phoned her mother in Rossville and her birth mother in Alabama and one of her dearest friends, Dawn McFadden, a Berry classmate who lives in Calhoun.

Their conversation was pure Jeanne. She joked that if she didn't finish her book, she was going to have to move back in with her mama. And she complained about how all the appliances in her house seemed to be going kablooey at the same time.

"I need a man around here, someone who drives a pickup truck with a big shiny toolbox in the back," she cracked. "I don't want a writer; I want somebody who can do something."

She also mentioned that she needed to take a cat in to be neutered.

"Does that sound like someone who's about to commit suicide?" McFadden says. "It was the night, and she had a depression, and this time it got her."

De Man found the body at the house the next afternoon. In the suicide note, typed in the wee, lonely hours of the morning, Braselton apologized for what she was about to do and left instructions for her funeral, which she knew would be held in the same chapel where she had wept over Al barely a year before. She said she didn't want to be saved. That she had lost faith in herself, that part of her had died with her husband.

And then she went to join him.

A couple of weeks ago, Ballantine issued its fall catalog, which had gone to press before Braselton died. "The Other Side of Air" appears in a prominent position, on the ninth of 116 pages, with talk of an author publicity tour and a national advertising campaign starting Aug. 26. Clearly, Ballantine was expecting big things.

It still wants to publish the book, although it doesn't know when or how that could happen. "We were about to offer her another two-book deal, but I hadn't

told her because I didn't want to distract her," says editor O'Neal. "She had an amazing future ahead of her."

In her suicide note, found in the same laptop that contains her unfinished manuscript, Braselton asked that some of her writer friends get together and complete her novel. She left clues about where she was headed in her computer and in some notes and outlines that were found beside her writing chair. But no one really knows how she would have filled out the final chapters.

The premise of the novel now seems haunting. It's the story of a woman who has died and watches from beyond as her elderly husband recovers from heart surgery and fends off his family's efforts to put him in a nursing home. In her final months, it seems, Jeanne Braselton was inhabiting a refracted image of her own suffering. She was a widow visiting a freshly dug grave, trying to find solace in a melancholy place.

Someday, she told friends, she would write about happier things.