

Local man makes most of 'second chance'

By RICH PARTAIN
Times Writer

In 1990, doctors gave Jim Ricks six months to live.

In 1997, not only is the Cullman man still alive, but Ricks' brush with death has driven him to reinvent his life as well.

Ricks was a high school dropout working as a salesman when he first became ill in the spring of 1988.

Diagnosed with a brain tumor, Ricks underwent a seemingly successful surgery to remove the cause of his violently painful headaches.

Two years later, the headaches returned. Doctors told Ricks the tumor had reappeared, growing downward into his brain tissue, and was now inoperable.

"The pain was so bad, all I could do was scream for God to take me. The pain was indescribable," Ricks said. "The doctors told me I had only six months to live. My life was over and I wanted the pain to be gone. It was so bad, I thought that suicide seemed to be the only escape."

Fortunately, Ricks instead opted for a second opinion. A UAB Hospital physician, Dr. Winfield Fisher III, gave Ricks an entirely different prognosis.

His treatment, which included 12 different surgeries to remove

the tumor, lasted three years, throughout which Ricks dealt with severe depression over the state of his life and situation.

"There were complications from the surgeries and recovery times," Ricks said. "I also still wasn't happy with who I was."

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Ricks said he lost everything in 1990. He was forced to file bankruptcy to help pay for the enormous medical bills from his surgeries. He also lost his job and his marriage in 1990.

"My life as I knew it was over," Ricks said.

After at long last receiving a clean bill of health, Ricks was referred to the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services in Montgomery.

Under the encouragement of ADRS Vocational Rehabilitation Service counselor Karen Stanley, Ricks began to formulate plans on how to repair the damage done to his life while trying to relearn such rudimentary tasks as

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Jim Ricks checks his students' computer aided drafting assignments at Wallace State Community College. In addition to his job as a drafting instructor at WSC, Ricks also helps children with learning disabilities through the Blount County School Transition Program, speaking with them about his own personal experiences with overcoming disability.

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walking.

"I had to learn everything all over again," Ricks said. "I had to scoot around the floor because I couldn't stand up ... people even had to help me dress. Basically, my life started over."

Ricks applied for school at Wallace State Community College in the field of drafting. In his first two quarters, he did amazingly well, finishing with a grade point average of 4.0.

"I started feeling good about myself because of school," Ricks said. "I began to realize that I could do it; I can make it through this."

While working for a drafting firm in Birmingham, Ricks received a call from one of his professors at Wallace, offering him a job as a lab assistant.

"I quit my job in Birmingham and moved back to Cullman," Ricks said. "I was asked to teach a class called Training for Industry; I loved it. I made up my mind to be the best at this I could be."

After receiving his associate's degree, Ricks decided to attend Athens State College to pursue a bachelor's degree in education.

In addition to a full load of classes at Athens, Ricks continued to teach at WSC and also opened his own contracting firm, which is now enormously successful.

Despite his success in the

business world, Ricks refuses to leave his teaching position at WSC.

"I guess I've always been a workaholic," Ricks said. "Last month I worked 280 hours over what I taught here at Wallace. I love it."

"Some people ask me why I don't just quit teaching and work full time, but I can't. I feel like my life was saved for some purpose. That purpose, for me, is to teach...to help people."

Ricks said the decision to change his life for the better came just prior to his last surgery.

While in the hospital, Ricks said he was anything but a model patient and often snapped at nurses and doctors to "leave [him] alone."

"I was laying in bed one day and I heard this whistling noise; every few moments you could hear this whistle," Ricks said. "The nurse walked in and I said 'What IS that?' She said it was the patient next door and explained that he was 19 years old and in the **military. He had suffered a really bad accident and had no family.**"

The nurse's answer shocked and shamed Ricks, he said.

"He was a quadrapalegic and all he could do was whistle. Every time he saw someone walk by his door, he would whistle, just wanting them to come in and talk to him."

"I just broke down and cried," Ricks said. "I realized it's so easy to feel sorry for yourself and to say 'poor me.' I looked out the

window and the clouds suddenly broke and I saw the sun. I stopped feeling sorry for myself and fought like I never had before."

Ricks said, despite his difficulties, he doesn't regret the hardships he has endured.

"I wouldn't take anything for **what I've been through,**" Ricks

said. "It's made me who I am. It was hard and it hurt, but I overcame it. Now, I look into the mirror and I like who I see. Not many people can honestly say that."

Ricks now lives in Cullman with his two daughters and says he is extremely grateful for his second chance at life and for the chance to teach.

"I am so grateful to Dr. Holloway and Dr. Bailey for letting me teach here, for giving me this chance. I love teaching and I love this institution," Ricks said. "I don't know why I was given this second chance at life. I can't answer that. I think it was to help people ... to teach these children and to help build their **self-esteem. That's one of the major reasons, I think.**"

Ricks said although doctors have told him he was cured, he still has times when the painful memories come flooding back and he feels a twinge of fear.

"I'm not going to say that, at times, the fear hasn't crept up within me," Ricks said. "But, I can say this: I can die tomorrow and I'm not scared, because I know who I am, now. I know why I'm here and I know who gave me that chance to be here."

"Every day, we need to take that day and get everything we can out of it, because today's going to be gone and we can't ever get it back," Ricks said. "I live life to its fullest. I've been blessed with a second chance and I'm not about to take that for granted."