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Al Benn's Alabama: A life and legacy of love

Written by
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Special to the Advertiser

This is a love story involving an elderly man and his mentally challenged son who has lived far beyond predictions of some of the best medical minds in America.

Lewie Crisman, 94, is well aware that he's in the deep twilight of his life and has begun a project to leave behind a financial gift in his son's name to help future Methodist ministers.

Lewie Rivers Crisman, 70, has been a ward of the state most of his life and has been moved from one mental-health facility to another in Alabama through the decades.

"Even before I get there, I know I won't be able to get through to him," his dad said a few days ago. "I ask myself why I keep driving such a long way at my age. But, I've got to. He's my son. It's that simple."

When Rivers was born in Selma in 1942, his parents had high hopes for their only child, wondering if, perhaps, he might even follow in his family's famous golf footsteps.

For non-golfers, "Crisman" probably doesn't ring a bell. But, for those who can't wait to get to the first tee, it's a magic name in Alabama golf circles.

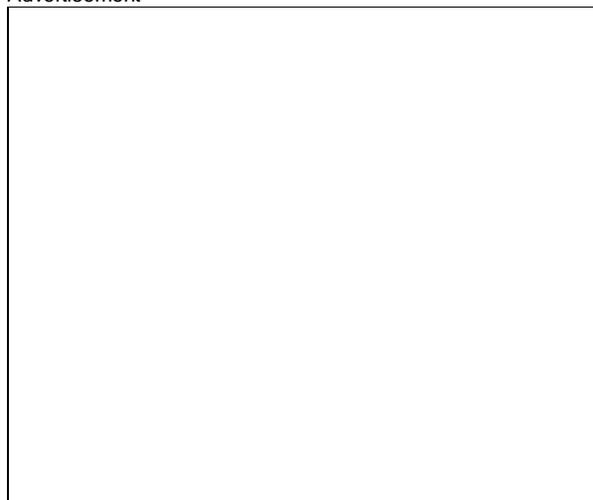
Lewie was one of Alabama's top amateur golfers, too, but he took a back seat to Otey Crisman, his late brother. Otey not only won a lot of tournaments, some nationwide, he also created a legendary mallet-headed, hickory shaft putter used by many PGA stars.

Lewie and Jean Crisman doted on their son, but they could see at an early age that something was wrong. He didn't begin to walk until he was 16 months old and his communication skills lagged far behind other children his age.

The couple took Rivers to see specialists at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, where it was determined that his problems stemmed from "congenital retardation" as a result of delayed oxygen intake at birth.

The specialist who examined Rivers told his devastated parents that their son's life span would be short, advising them to accept that medical fact "and strive only to keep him healthy and satisfied."

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The medical diagnosis didn't deter Rivers' parents, who continued to work with him. But, as he got older, they knew he needed more help than they could provide.

The "miracle" they had hoped for didn't come and, by the time Rivers was 16, his parents reluctantly admitted him to the state's mental institution at Bryce Hospital in Tuscaloosa.

At times, their son would become violent and had to be physically restrained. He was classified as one of 151 "severely impaired patients" at a Partlow facility.

Through the years, Rivers has been transferred to various mental-health sites. Today, he is at a facility far from Montgomery, where his father has lived for many years.

An avid reader who loves to pen his thoughts in various forms, including a booklet titled: "When Doodlin' is Done," Crisman looks much younger than his 94 years, but nagging back problems have him thinking more and more about how much of a future he has left.

Compounding his physical pain is the loss of his wife more than two decades ago. Lewie misses Jean every day. Cancer was the cause of her death, but her husband feels that their son's situation had to have been a contributing factor.

Today, he keeps himself busy with The Lewie Rivers Crisman Memorial Scholarship Trust to provide scholarships to students

who plan to attend an accredited seminary recognized by the United Methodist Church.

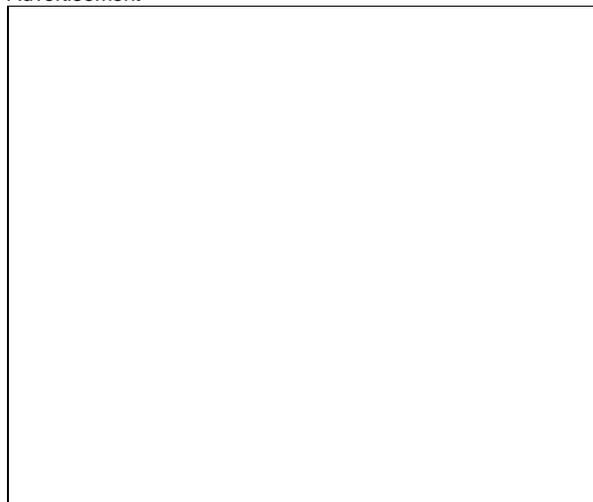
Thanks to a generous \$10,000 contribution from an anonymous donor who owes much of his financial success to Lewie Crisman's guiding hand through the years, the fund is off and running.

The challenge now is to attract more donations to help the fund grow through the years so that the corpus will not be touched, only accumulate interest from investments.

He knows he won't be around when the first scholarships are handed out, but he is determined to do what he can to see that, one day, they will help young divinity students.

Lewie said he and Jean often would talk at night about "committing our modest earthly remaining estate" to the trust, something that would amount to "a blessing of our loving children not our own."

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“These precious memories are what sustains me and keeps my clock ticking at the age of 94,” he said, in an open letter to friends who might be able to contribute to the trust.

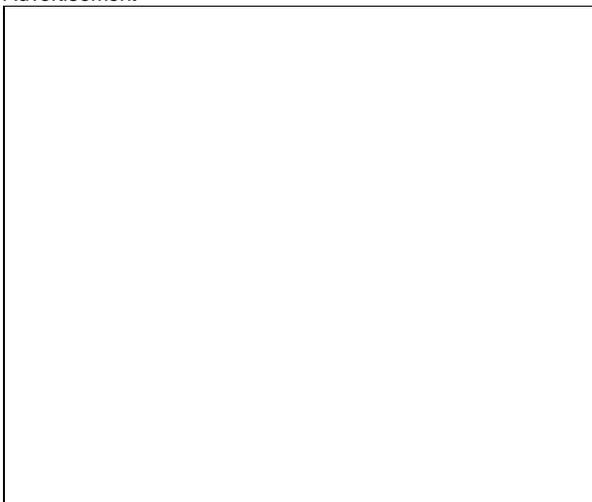
The house he lives in has value, and Lewie said his will stipulates that whatever can be recovered when it’s sold after his death will go into the trust named for his son.

He might have left Selma years ago, but the retired land surveyor has lots of “seasoned citizen” friends back home who hold him in high esteem.

“Lewie is one of the finest, most compassionate individuals I’ve ever known,” said Selma attorney Henry Pitts. “I can’t think of a better way to describe him other than to say he’s a great person.”

Tax deductible donations can be sent to the Lewie Rivers Crisman Memorial Scholarship Trust in care of the Alabama West-Florida United Methodist Foundation Inc., P.O. Box 8006, Dothan, AL 36304

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