

Blades of grass and worn flags surround the stone tributes to the the men and women in uniform who now rest in the RI Veterans Cemetery. After visiting the graves of my grandparents, two years ago, I remember replacing American flags on Memorial Day. I was picking up a fallen American flag upon a grave marking of a Korean veteran, thinking that it was sad that a grave appeared forgotten beneath overgrown grass and dirt. I cleared the debris away from the marker and placed a new flag next to it, and prayed that the deceased had found peace and was not alone. I often think of the number of graves I have seen, marking the sites of the fallen, and ask how can one overcome the grief of losing someone dear to them. When I learned about Ronnie's story, it compelled me to not only think about the pain of losing a beloved serviceman or woman, but to find a way a honoring their memory and sharing inspirational stories of hope and love.

In today's society of technology and connection, it is easy for some to forget why and how we have been able to establish our nation and to continue its survival. We the people of the United States need to remember that the freedoms we share today remain because those who have dedicated their lives to defending and preserving them, have paid the ultimate price. As a Cranston High School West student and the daughter of a disabled American veteran, I am grateful for the honorable service that PS3 Ronald A. Gill, Jr. gave to our country, to defend our liberties and protect our freedoms. Oftentimes, high school students do not inquire what their predecessors did before them, as if they are faceless and do not have a story to tell. Ronnie's story, however, was a reminder that he walked the same halls and sat in the same classrooms as my classmates and I, learning, laughing, and living life in the moment, making decisions about the future before final exams and graduation ceremonies. A Cranston High School West graduate, Ronnie reminds us that we can accomplish a lot in the short time we have on Earth.

Ronnie's devotion to his family and country is a priceless merit that I strive to attain myself. I cannot imagine the feeling of fulfillment and worth that Ronnie felt after he decided that his passion for the culinary arts was not enough, and that he found a new one in serving in the military. I believe that Ronnie's strive to succeed through hard work, perseverance, and respecting others is a lesson that is a noble pathway to follow. Like Ronnie, I have worked hard in high school and I have made countless friendships. Learning about the lasting bonds of friendship Ronnie had with his friends and determination to succeed are two values that I will take with me as I graduate high school. As the daughter of a disabled American veteran, the granddaughter of two WWII veterans, and niece of four veterans—one of whom was wounded in Vietnam—I have found my passion in giving back to our military. After witnessing the compassionate care that health care professionals had provided to my father at the VA Hospital, I wanted to work in the medical field. It is my aspiration to one day work in a veterans hospital, and Ronnie's perseverance to dedicate his life to service is something that I will follow. I discovered at Cranston West that my

dream was possible through the inspiring teachers who have helped me find my strengths and overcome challenges. Ironically, Johnson and Wales is opening a Masters in Physician's Assistant Studies program, which I plan on working toward during my undergraduate studies in college. Ronnie's determination to complete the 4,500 mile, 9 day journey to Alaska is something that I deeply admire, and if I ever feel that I have failed or will never achieve my goals, I will remind myself of the willpower that allowed him to complete his quest, and I will overcome the obstacles before me.

Personally, I have experienced the pain of losing a loved one, yet I cannot imagine the grief that came with the sudden loss of Ronnie. The tragedy of losing a loved one who had a pure heart, a loving spirit, and a dedicated soul, is heart wrenching. Questioning faith and yearning to have more time, to say goodbye, are not shameful in my opinion. They show the strength of love that we share with another person. It brought tears to my eyes when I read how Ronnie never had the chance to be the father to Gracie that he should have, sharing happy memories that I am blessed to have with my father. I do not know how I would have grown up without sharing the bond I share with my father, and I vow to cherish the precious moments I have, instead of taking advantage of those which Gracie and Ronnie were denied. Knowing that Ronnie's spirit has remained with the hearts he touched is an angelic blessing. Reading the story of the ladybug has opened my mind to having a connection with a loved one who has died, not only in your heart, but watching over you. The presence of the ladybug is a reminder that those who have gone before us will never truly leave us. I am empowered by the strength that those who loved Ronnie before his passing, and continue to love him today, because of their strength to share the story of Ronald Gill, Jr. has inspired me to never abandon my dream of providing medical services to our nation's veterans, for the ultimate sacrifices that men and women like Ronnie have made to protect the United States have secured my freedom to achieve all.