

A MESSAGE FROM ROGER

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Byline: LANE DEGREGORY

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Body

At first, he thought it was trash.

The bottle was bobbing in a canal behind Don Smith's house in Venetian Isles, drifting toward his dock. He saw it on the Fourth of July, while he was playing with his grandchildren. He grabbed a fishing net and scooped the bottle out of the murky water.

One side was fuzzy with algae. The other was clear. Black electrical tape was wound tightly around the top. The rusty cap said "Pepsi" in an obsolete logo.

Inside, there was a note.

The paper was folded, scorched sepia by the sun. It had been ripped from a school writing tablet, the kind with dotted blue lines. Smith pulled it out and smoothed it on a table.

"To whoever finds this letter please write me a letter and let me know," the note said in shaky pencil. "Roger J. Clay, 890 Linwood Ave., Fairfield Ohio, 45014."

Don and his wife, Carol, know the place. They are from Cincinnati, about 25 miles from Fairfield. Their son Sean works in Fairfield. "What are the odds?" Don asked.

Then he saw the date. On the bottom right corner, the paper said: 12/27/84.

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That bottle had been in the water for almost 19 years.

Don's daughter-in-law is a teacher. By the handwriting, she said, whoever wrote the note was probably 7 or 8 years old. Roger J. Clay would be 26 or 27 now.

"Wouldn't it be great if we could find him and let him know we found his bottle?" Carol said.

"I'll try," said Don. "But 19 years is a long, long time."

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That night, after the fireworks, Don got on the Internet. He didn't find Roger J. Clay. He found this:

"Roger K. Clay, 890 Linwood Ave., Fairfield, Ohio."

A few more clicks and Don found public records showing Roger K. was 49. "Must be the kid's father," Don told his wife. "And it looks like he still lives at the same house. What are the odds?"

Don tried to find a phone number, but had no luck.

So he wrote a letter: "I found your son's message in a bottle behind my house in St. Petersburg, Florida," he wrote.

"I just thought you would want to know."

He mailed the letter the next morning, Saturday.

On Monday, he called the St. Petersburg Times.

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Don and Carol Smith are 56 and retired. Don owned a Cincinnati business that manufactured trailers to haul mobile television studios. Carol was a Realtor.

"I couldn't believe it. Could a bottle really last that long out there? In Tampa Bay?" Don asked. "Geez, 19 years!"

Back at work, we tried to find out more about the boy who wrote the message. Caryn Baird, a Times researcher, tapped into electronic databases, tracked all sorts of records. But she couldn't come up with a Roger J. Clay.

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Then she scanned Social Security files. There he was.

"He's dead," she said.

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There had been an article in the paper.

Nine days after his 21st birthday, Roger J. Clay was driving home on his new Suzuki. "His motorcycle went left of center and collided head-on with a pickup," the Columbus Dispatch reported. "Police are still trying to determine why Clay's motorcycle went left of center."

It happened on July 10, 1998. Five years ago today.

I called Don Smith and read him the news.

He coughed. Or choked. Or something. "Oh my God. Oh my God. I knew it," he said. "That's terrible. I can't explain it. Oh my God. I just had this feeling something had happened to that kid."

Now Don was even more determined to find Roger's parents. "Imagine what that message would mean to them," he said.

So Caryn found a new address and a phone number for Roger's dad. Then she found a number for someone she thought might be his mom, at a different address. I gave the numbers to Don.

A half-hour later, he called me back.

"You're not going to believe this," he said.

Roger's dad wasn't home. So Don had called the other number, the one for Lisa M. Ferguson, who used to be married to Roger K. Clay. A woman had answered. No, Lisa wasn't home. "I'm Lisa's sister," the woman said. "Can I help?"

Don explained why he was calling.

"Oh my God!" the woman gasped. "Lisa is away," she said. Every year this time, she goes away. "She can't stand to be in Ohio around the anniversary of the accident."

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She gave Don a cell phone number.

"Lisa is down in Florida," her sister said. "In Seminole."

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Lisa had just come back from the pool when her cell phone rang. She and her husband, Al, were cooling off in their hotel room.

When Don told Lisa he had found a bottle, she started screaming. She knew the rest. She remembers that note. She remembers the day her son wrote it.

They were in Clearwater, celebrating Christmas with her sister. Roger was 7. His dad took him fishing on Pier 60. Roger wrote the note and took tape from the tackle box and sealed the note in the bottle and tossed it off the pier. Lisa remembers telling him he was littering.

Roger was a happy, active kid. He liked to pretend to climb the walls like Spider-Man. He liked shooting squirrels with his dad. He raced dirt bikes. He fished. And he dropped a Pepsi bottle in the water even though his mother disapproved.

Now, 19 years later, a stranger had called and given her back her son.

"Here I am, trying to escape Roger's death, and he reaches out and gives me this message, this gift," she said.

Lisa told Don she wanted to see him. She wanted to hold that bottle. She wanted to touch that note, trace Roger's childish letters with her finger.

Don wanted to see Lisa, too. He wanted to learn about Roger.

They agreed to meet for dinner at 7:30 Tuesday night.

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How does it happen? Can a message really float around in a bottle for 19 years and surface so close to where it started?

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"I'm not at all surprised," said Robert Weisberg. He is a professor in the College of Marine Science at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg. He makes models of currents, tracks tides and studies how objects travel in water.

"There would be no problem at all getting a bottle from Clearwater's Pier 60 to Tampa Bay. Water does move," he said. "There are currents out there that are driven by wind. There are tides. It certainly is reasonable for something like that to stay in circulation around this area."

The bottle could have gotten hung up in a mangrove somewhere and stayed there for 15 years, Weisberg said. It could have moved around a bit, floated down to Sanibel Island and come back up into the bay again. It could have circulated up the gulf toward the Panhandle, then gone to Texas and come back under the Sunshine Skyway bridge. "Once something drifts offshore, there's no telling," he said.

Vembu Subramanian, who works in USF's office of Coastal Ocean Monitoring and Prediction Systems, said the bottle could have traveled thousands of paths from Clearwater to Venetian Isles. "There could have been boats moving it. It could have bounced through all those little islands. Who knows what kinds of influences could have impacted its path all those years?"

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All day Tuesday, Roger J. Clay's mother couldn't stop smiling. And crying. And smiling.

She called her daughter in Ohio. She called her brothers and sisters. She called Roger's dad, who cried so hard he had to hang up.

"I had forgotten all about that bottle. It's kind of hard to put into words, all the emotions that brings back," Roger K. Clay told me from Ohio. "I told Lisa, it was like he was trying to remind us he was still with us."

Lisa told Roger's dad she would get to see the bottle that night. She and Al got to the restaurant early. At 7:40 p.m., a man with blue eyes and salt-and-pepper hair walked up, holding a bubble-wrapped bottle. Lisa smothered him, weeping, without even introducing herself. Don hugged her back. Hard. Then they stood there, in the lobby of the restaurant, holding on and sobbing into each other's shoulders. Their spouses stood by, dabbing at their eyes.

"Isn't this unreal?" Carol Smith asked.

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"He's still touching lives," Al Ferguson said. "He was an amazing kid."

Over Diet Cokes and iced teas, salads and flaky rolls, the two couples talked about Roger. How he loved to play practical jokes, rig buckets of water above his sister's bedroom door, string fishing line across the hallway. How he lettered in football three years in high school. How he played varsity baseball. How the girls all loved him. He loved country music, they said, and fishing and deer hunting.

"He was buried in his blue jeans."

Ever since he was a kid, Roger had wanted a motorcycle. He begged his mom, then - after his parents got divorced - he started in on his stepdad. They kept saying no. Too dangerous.

So the day he turned 21, Roger bought a brand new Suzuki GSX-R750W. He drove it to his mom's house, where he still lived. She turned white. He grinned.

But his bike kept breaking down. The fuel hose kept popping off, killing the engine. Roger took the bike back to the dealership four times the first week. Five years ago today, he picked it up after it was supposed to be fixed again. He and two friends headed down the highway. Roger's fuel hose dropped off a few miles from home. The engine cut out and he crossed the center line.

"It's not natural," Lisa said. Under the table, she cradled Roger's Pepsi bottle in her lap. "You're not supposed to have to bury your baby."

Lisa slipped her wallet from her purse and pulled out a photo. Roger's high school graduation portrait. He was wearing a blue oxford and jeans.

"What a nice-looking kid," Don said. "What a shame."

"He was studying to be an FBI agent," Lisa said. "He was going to school during the day and working third shift. Everyone loved him. More than 400 people came to his funeral."

A few weeks after the funeral, she said, a notice came in the mail. Suzuki was recalling its GSX-R750W line because of a fault in the fuel system. Lisa called a lawyer. She spent five years suing Suzuki. Finally, in February, she settled out of court for an undisclosed amount.

"The money will never bring back Roger," she told her dinner companions. "But you all have."

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"I dread this time of year every year. It's the worst. But now I have something wonderful to think about," Lisa said. She reached across the table, grabbed Don and Carol's hands. "You all have given me so much to be happy about. You have given me this message from Roger. He's still playing tricks on me."

When dinner was over, the two couples walked out into the dark.

"Why don't you all come visit us in Ohio?" Lisa asked the Smiths. She plans to put the bottle on her mantel, and wants them to see it.

- Staff writer Lane DeGregory can be reached at (727) 893-8825 or degregory@sptimes.com.

Graphic

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION; PHOTO, CHRIS ZUPPA, (2); PHOTO, Courtesy of Clay family; MAP; The letter Roger K. Clay put in a bottle and tossed into the Gulf of Mexico off Clearwater Beach.; Don Smith gives Lisa Ferguson the bottle and a note her son dropped into the Gulf of Mexico nearly 19 years ago.; Lisa Ferguson holds a photo of; her son Roger Clay at age 18.; (1984) 7-year-old Roger J. Clay; Locates where the bottle was dropped in 1984 and where it was found in St. Petersburg on July 4. Inset locates Roger Clay's hometown, Fairfield, Ohio.

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