

This friend has always stuck closer than a brother

Most of the time, our boss left us alone. These days, I wish he hadn't.

The summer before college, a group of friends recruited me to work a job the federal government has since banned. We were telemarketers. We were terrible.

Every afternoon, about the same time East coast mothers finished their carpools, three or four of us — depending on who quit that particular week — went to work in a trailer behind a spacious office building.

And every afternoon, Cliff — our boss — laughed at us. Then he left us alone.

While most of our buddies caught the hundreds that fell from the old man's pocket, we sat in a trailer and called irreverent fathers who wouldn't have bought a \$30 Disney stock if we offered it for a buck.

And somehow, Cliff knew better than to coach us on sales techniques.

The job never amounted to much for any of us. Two guys became bankers and another one practices law. Come to think of it, that summer of dial-tone horror marked the end of the close relationships I had with those guys.

But for reasons I still can't explain, that summer marked the beginning of a new friendship with a guy named Cliff Hembree, who I could proudly call my ex-boss.

Cliff and I didn't have many similarities when we met more than 10 years ago. He spent his free time lifting weights; I lifted golf clubs. He could rough up a cocky frat boy; I could rough up a liberal classmate who wanted to argue. It was the stuff friendships were made of, even though I didn't know it at the time.

Then it hit me one day, kind of like the car that hit Cliff seven days ago.

We were standing in a portal at Bryant-Denny Stadium. It had been a couple of years since Cliff left Tuscaloosa and became

a State Trooper in Louisiana, and I was well into my third newspaper job.

Right before kick-off, Cliff and I were making our way to his usual seats when some husky fellow barreled past me and shoved a woman out of the way.

Cliff extended his thick arm. "Hang on a second."

The rude fellow turned around, stared at Cliff, and walked away with his shoulders just a hint lower. He never said a word to Cliff, and Cliff didn't say another word to him.

The fellow got the point.

So did I.

"A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."

I have two of the most wonderful brothers in the world, but at that moment, Cliff became the friend who would stick closer than a brother. I realized he would be a friend who never let me down. I also realized he was a friend I never wanted to let down.

When we were old and gray, and Alabama's football team finally escaped from the pits of probation, Cliff and I would be standing together in a portal at Bryant-Denny Stadium catching up on the months we had gone without seeing each other.

Then, with the ring of a phone, I found out we may never watch another football game together.

Cliff is a Sheriff's deputy in Tuscaloosa, and around 3 a.m. last Saturday, Cliff provided back-up to a police officer.

At one moment, Cliff helped call in the

registration on a gun; the next moment, a team of doctors pulled out a crash cart to revive the life of old Clifford, who had just been hit by a passing car.

Miraculously, the doctors saved my buddy's life. A few hours later, they rushed him into surgery and removed a blood clot from his brain.

As I write, Cliff is still fighting. He's fighting a million cocky frat boys. He's trying to bench-press the world. And I'm standing right beside him — helpless.

Yes, Cliff and I have enjoyed a friendship like no other I've known, but what transpired in the waiting room of the trauma unit last Saturday was like nothing I've ever seen.

By the time I made it to Tuscaloosa, most of Cliff's local friends had already arrived to stand at the side of Cliff's precious wife, Lisa. As the hours ticked, and the surgeons followed God's miracle, other friends of Cliff's stepped off the second-floor elevator.

Barry made the trip from Troy to Tuscaloosa in less than two hours. Chuck and Jason left their hunting dog in the Louisiana woods and barely touched the pavement during their trip to the hospital. And Ron caught the first flight from California, making it to Tuscaloosa later that evening.

At one point during the day, there were more than 25 guys sitting around the waiting room, each fighting back tears through the wonderful stories about their buddy. Each probably remembered the moment when Cliff stuck his thick arm out for them.

Those of us so lucky to have won Cliff's friendship know this accident won't beat him. We all know he may never be the same, but not one of us can wait to hug his neck again.

Those of you who don't know Cliff, I wish you did.

Then again, I bet you do.



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PUBLISHER**

PUBLISHED IN *The Demopolis Times*

DECEMBER 6, 2003