

Our response often determines outlook

by **Ben Gonzales**
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March held many twists and turns. There were challenges that appeared impossible to accomplish and obstacles that seemed insurmountable. And there were opportunities available that were never there before.

All these challenges caused me to pause and reflect on what is important, and what I should do about them.

The first thing I did was notice the commanding general's leadership philosophy sitting on my desk. In his letter, Brig. Gen. Jeff Gabbert says, "I expect us all to take care of our families, seek professional development opportunities and enjoy the rewarding opportunities this command offers. I also believe that taking time to enjoy life and all of the wonderful opportunities we have is important."

The weekend after I re-read the leadership philosophy, I received the news about Air Force Maj. Gen. A.J. Stewart. The former Air Force Personnel Center commander passed away in early March after fighting brain cancer. Although I never worked for him, I heard him give a Veterans Day speech in 2011. Here was a man at the top of his game: avid biker, pilot,

personable, dynamic speaker, energetic and well liked by his staff.

After more than 30 years of service, Stewart was informed in 2012 he had stage IV brain cancer. Instead of sulking and withdrawing, he fought on and went public with his battle. In a March 2012 editorial, he reminded us that life is short and precious.

Despite knowing that brain tumors can be fatal, Stewart said, "Be positive. You have to fight a challenge like you intend to win. Leave negative thoughts behind and be ready to endure. Run your race like a winner. Attitude may be the number one component of success."

More than 1,500 people showed up to say goodbye to the general, and walked away with the memories of the way he lived life to the fullest.

Another valuable life lesson came from South African Ernie Els, whom I met as a guest caddie for a day at the Valero Texas Open. Watching pro golfers warm up on the driving range was inspiring. Their swings were mechanical: with such precision and power. On television, some people appear to be larger than life, superhuman and unapproachable; however, Els was personable, friendly, deserving of his nickname "The Big Easy" at 6 feet 3 inches tall with a demeanor as smooth as his flowing golf swing.

Humble with a gentle soul, the former No. 1 player in the world gladly welcomed me as his honorary caddie for the afternoon. Els said he used the practice round of golf "to work on my greens and lines." I acted like I understood what he was talking about, but just between me and you, I had no idea what he and his real caddie were saying when they huddled together before each shot. It was as if they were speaking a numerical language in British accents that only they understood. I must admit that I was in awe as he took time to sign autographs and talk to every person who stopped him along the course.

When I asked Els about the game of golf, he said it is really like life.

"You can only take it one step at a time," Els said. "I like to play it one (stroke) at a time while planning for the entire course. And you really have to have a short memory. You cannot dwell on the negatives. You have to stay positive and know that the game and life is better up ahead."

Looking back, these three gentlemen all shared the same message: we need to have a positive outlook on life. Learning from these leaders, it is important to remember to enjoy life and maintain a positive attitude no matter what obstacles are ahead of us.



Photo by John Hancock

Ben Gonzales, left, was an honorary caddie for pro golfer Ernie Els at the Valero Texas Open March 26.