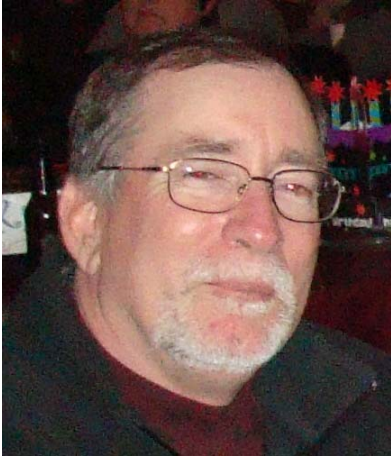


# A Tribute to Ralph Meacham



Ralph Meacham lives life. Some might say, “Of course. We all do.” Indeed, Ralph lives life, savors life, relishes life. He has built a storehouse of memories that serve him well at a time when ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease) affects his body. The disease itself is relatively unknown and quiet. Opposites apparently attract, because “relatively unknown” and “quiet” don’t describe Ralph Meacham at all.

After all, he’s a farmer, a storyteller, a photographer, a husband of Kim, a dad of Mary Katherine (11) and Hanna (8), a neighbor, and a friend. He’s a man of integrity, an active thinker, an informed voter, an involved father of current and future 4-H members, a man with a voice and passion. With that as his foundation, he wants to make Lou

Gehrig’s disease more visible so that more attention can be focused on finding treatments and a cure. He’s intent on making a wallflower disease like ALS into the life of the awareness party – more like Ralph himself.

To know Ralph is to see how he has lived his life. He is a *man of the land* who followed in his father’s and his grandfather’s footsteps, who respects nature’s cycles of life and death followed by rebirth, who picks wild buttercups for his three best girls, who follows tobacco from tiny transplants through drying and bundling, who stays awake all night to be on hand for the birth of lambs in the cold of winter, who raises Yellow Labs as members of his family, who hikes the Great Smoky Mountains with a 60-pound backpack, who can’t imagine why anyone in a right mind would ever litter or harm the earth, who listens for the song of the cardinals and who plants red salvia in memory of his dear grandmother.

Ralph is a *Tennessee 4-H’er* who transferred his childhood experience into a career with the Agricultural Extension Office. He has been in the fields, the barns, the show rings, and the judge’s chair. He knows that all kids are blue ribbons and all projects are a chance to learn by doing. That tradition now is a part of his daughters’ lives where he’s most proud of their showmanship.

As a *storyteller*, Ralph is as at home spinning tales at the National 4-H Center near Washington, D.C., as he is at a neighbor boy’s birthday picnic. Give him a minute and he can tell a story to fit whatever the topic of discussion, always letting the listeners mold the moral around them. He’s an advocate for the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling where men and women, young and old, see life’s stories through the spoken word and the silence between the words. He learned that gift at his grandfather’s knee and later as they walked side by side, sharing the stories that make them Meacham’s.

Whatever the place – in the willows alongside a marsh, beneath a tree in an orange grove, deep in a misty gully, at the side of a bridge, along the shore of a lake, on the beach with his girls – Ralph finds the light through his camera lens. He captures the smiles of loved ones and strangers, the quirkiness of a personality, the birth of a baby goose, the dew as it greets the morning, the sun as it moves past the horizon. He has a *photographer’s* skills and an artist’s soul.

There's more to Ralph Meacham, of course. Ralph was born in Williamson County, Tennessee into a generation farming family raising sheep, beef and dairy cattle, tobacco, and forage. His first 4-H experience was showing dairy cows. This was the start of a long and continuing love of 4-H. After graduating high school Ralph spent the next four years in the Armed Forces in Iceland. Soon after leaving the service, Ralph entered the University of Tennessee where he received a BS in animal science. After graduating, he went to work as a 4-H Agent in Maury County, Tennessee for the next seven years. During his time in the military and in his 4-H position, Ralph developed his photography skills and was subsequently offered a full time photographer position; therefore, he chose to leave 4-H work. After several years he moved back to the family farm to split his time between farming and photography. It was during this time that the opportunity of a lifetime presented itself. In 1993 when Tennessee was the host state for the Southern Region 4-H Volunteer Forum, Ralph served as the chairman for the steering committee that plans "Rock Eagle." Since that time, Ralph has served as the official photographer for the forum.

Each year, at the end of the forum, Ralph's love for the forum is reflected with the slide show, which he started over 15 years ago, highlighting the volunteers and the fun that they have had throughout their weeklong experience. He believes the forum enables volunteers to gain the foundation they need to take back to their county to establish a strong and successful 4-H program, which not only benefits the youth in their county but also benefits their overall state's 4-H program.

But Ralph Meacham is more than the black and white on paper. He is a rich man. Whatever is in his bank account, that's not what matters to Ralph. He's rich in friendships, rich with memories, rich in the desire to make a difference, and rich with living in the now.