

Calm, humble firefighter carried a fire for family, life

By STEPHANIE HAYES, Times Staff Writer

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TAMPA - As a firefighter, Joe Wooles certainly found himself in high-pressure, death-defying situations.

But he wouldn't come home and spout sensational tales of bravado. He down played things, kept quiet, kept humble - kept his family calm.

One day, his son noticed a fire helmet lying around the house. It was cracked down the middle.



What happened, Dad?

This time, he told a story. As Joe saved someone from a burning house, a roof collapsed on his head. But don't worry, he told his son. "That's why God gave me a hard head."

He didn't mean to be a firefighter. But it was meant for him.

Joe, a Vietnam veteran, wanted to work as a mechanic on fire trucks. In the Air Force, he had worked on airplanes.

After his tour of duty, he moved to Tampa and met his wife, Deborah, a nurse. In 1972, he joined the Tampa Fire Department.

The firehouse felt natural - the camaraderie, the 24-hour shifts, the notion of helping someone - it drove him.

On his days off, he'd work jobs in pest control and real estate to bring in extra money, but nothing compared to firefighting.

He became a driver, then captain, and eventually, district chief. He stayed, for 31 years.

At home, he liked structure for his two kids, Lance and Kelly.

His son could get straight A's academically, but get a spanking for a B in conduct, Lance Wooles said. His dad's reasoning? Not everyone is smart, but everyone should act right.

Everything was his "favorite." Broccoli? "That's my favorite!" Pizza? "That's my favorite!" A guy at the firehouse? "He's my favorite!"

Every Sunday was the same: The Wooleses went to church, then to the old Tampa Bay Center mall for lunch. Then on game day, they'd go see the Tampa Bay Buccaneers play.

They watched, through the rain and heat, through the miserable losing games and the bright orange uniforms. Joe had season tickets every year since 1977.

By nature, Joe was even-keeled, never boisterous or loud. But the Bucs brought out a wild fan. He'd stand and cheer and yell and scream.

When the Bucs won the Super Bowl in 2003, Joe and Lance were there looking on.

That moment - that's Lance's favorite.

For more than seven years, Joe fought his own fire: lymphoma.

The prognosis was bad. But Joe outlived expectations.

Joe died on Monday at age 59. His son thinks it's wrong to say his dad "lost a battle."

Joe wanted to retire from the fire department. He wanted to see Lance get married. He had things to do, so he wasn't going to leave. He went to the Super Bowl between chemo sessions. He was a member of the YMCA, working out as often as he could.

"He already beat it," Lance said. "He was the most relentless person. He hung on as long as he needed."

Joe never understood the fuss.

When he retired, his family threw a surprise party. More than 200 guests came.

Joe was confused. Surely there was another event going on. All these people wouldn't show up for a firefighter just doing his job.

Would they?

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BIOGRAPHY

Joe Wooles

Born: June 5, 1948.

Died: Aug. 20, 2007.

Survivors: Wife, Deborah; daughter, Kelly; son, Lance, and his wife, Kristina.

Services: Family will receive friends from 1-3 p.m. today at Gonzalez Funeral Home. Memorial service at 3 p.m. Donations to the Fireman's Benevolence Fund, 201 E Yukon St., Tampa, or LifePath Hospice.