

Craig Parker and his wife, Nan, serve on staff with The Navigators at Boston Univ. in Boston, MA

The Vietnam Vet, the Cop, and the Atheist

What one Navigator discovered in his spiritual family tree

By Craig Parker (Collegiate) and Becky Grosenbach (Communication) (February 2011)

February 2, 2011—Have you ever researched your family tree? There's a peculiar excitement in discovering your distant relative was a courier in the Civil War or that your great-grandmother's name is on a passenger list at Ellis Island. But what if you were able to trace your spiritual family? What if you knew who it was that led your spiritual father or mother to Christ—and who introduced him or her to Jesus? What kind of person was he?

Navigator Craig Parker recently spoke with his spiritual father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. He learned they included a couple of Vietnam vets, a cop, and a teenage troublemaker.

"I didn't put all the pieces together until 2010, but it affected my life 38 years ago," Craig says. Today, Craig and his wife, Nancy, work with The Navigators on the campus of Boston University.

Craig's research led him to a man named John Burnett. John had accepted Christ at 12 years of age in his hometown in West Virginia at a small Pentecostal church. As a young man, John joined the Air Force and was stationed in Turkey for a year and a half where he was active with other Christians in the chapel program.

From Turkey he transferred to Kelly Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. There he was introduced to Navigator Kay Crumby and the base's Navigator group. John's spiritual growth was nurtured through some basic Navigator tools including [Lessons on Christian Living](#) and the [Topical Memory System](#).

In 1967 John was shipped out to Tan San Nhut Air Base in Saigon. In Vietnam, John met another young airman named Ray Namie.

"I knew Ray was not seeking God nor was he the least bit interested in learning anything about Jesus," John said. "Despite my fear of being rejected by Ray, I began to ask him probing questions."

One day at the Air Police desk in the 7th Air Force headquarters, John showed Ray the Bridge Illustration using Scripture to describe man's separation from God and how putting one's faith in Christ could bridge that gap. They prayed a short prayer and Ray trusted Christ at that moment. John helped Ray grow in much the same way others had helped him as a new believer.

A few years later, John and Ray both got out of the Air Force and went their separate ways, John to California and Ray to New England. Ray became a police officer in Hampton, New Hampshire.

One day in 1969, Ray was driving his police cruiser through town and noticed a teenage boy towing a car with a dump truck. Ray recognized who it was: 17-year-old Rodd Hersey. All the local cops knew Rodd. He was constantly in trouble, and this time was no exception.



Ray turned on his blue lights, flipped a U-turn and pulled Rodd over. Rodd didn't have a license, the truck wasn't registered, and he was towing the car illegally. Ray motioned for him to get out of the truck and to climb into the front seat of the cruiser.

Rather than lecture Rodd, Ray asked him a simple question: "Do you like this life you're living? Because the way you're living right now you're going to end up either six feet under or in jail the rest of your life."

With that, Ray shared the Gospel with Rodd, using verses he had learned during his early discipleship with John Burnett and others. Immediately Rodd responded to the Gospel invitation and received Christ. After praying with Rodd, Ray said, "I'm sorry, but I have to do this . . ." and gave Rodd a summons to appear in court a few weeks later.

The day of his court appearance, Rodd sat in the back of the courtroom and waited for his name to be called. Several hours went by as everyone else in the room made their brief appearance before the bench. Finally the judge adjourned the court for the day, stood up, and walked out. The room was empty except for Rodd and a clerk gathering her files.

Rodd went up to her and said, "My name is Rodd Hersey, I was supposed to pay a fine today." Glancing up at him she said, "Rodd Hersey? Let me look." She checked her files and said, "Oh yes, you were supposed to be here today, but your fine has already been paid. It was paid by Officer Namie."

Stunned, Rodd walked out of the courtroom. It was the greatest act of love he had ever experienced.

A few years later, in March of 1972, 17-year-old Craig Parker attended an introductory meeting for a crisis hotline organization at which he had decided to volunteer.

"I was an atheistic high school senior," Craig said. "As we were introducing ourselves, I mentioned that I had been reading a New Testament given to me by a former girlfriend. I was trying to figure it out if it was for real or not."

One of the participants in the discussion group asked Craig if he was a Christian. "I replied defiantly, 'No.' Then the man asked me, 'Would you like to hear how to become one?' I told him I would. That man was Rodd Hersey. He suggested we go to a nearby restaurant and for the next few hours I argued with him about why I couldn't believe in God."

Rodd shared the Gospel with Craig, quoting Scripture passages he had learned from his early days of discipleship with Ray Namie and others.

"Finally, against all my earthly beliefs, when Rodd asked me if I would like to receive Christ, I said yes. We drove to Hampton Beach, and that night I knelt in the sand by the ocean, trusting Christ for my life and salvation."

Although Craig didn't know anything about The Navigators at the time, a few years later, he and his wife, Nancy, started volunteering with a new Navigator ministry at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts under the leadership of Navigators Bill and Ellen Cassidy. A couple years later they moved with the Cassedys to Langley Air Force Base in Virginia and then joined Navigator staff in 1980. They worked at the Naval Station in Norfolk under the leadership of Navigators Jimmie and Cheryl Truhlar.

"By God's grace He used us to reach out to young military personnel just like John Burnett and Ray Namie years before," Craig said.

The Parkers went on to work at Ramstein Air Base in Germany for seven years, then at Dartmouth College for 17 years, and since the fall of 2010 they've been at Boston University.

"Nancy and I have seen our 35 years of Navigator ministry multiply in ways we could never have imagined," Craig said.

Craig still talks to Rodd every week. "He continues to share his faith with everyone he can. He's a hard working father who raised his son by himself," Craig says. Rodd's son is in Bible college studying to become a youth pastor. "I have only spoken with Ray a few times," Craig said, "but he has also labored for Christ throughout his lifetime."

"Earlier this year I asked Ray about John Burnett. He said John is in his late 60s and his faith continues in a vibrant way. He serves actively in his Presbyterian church in Los Angeles."

In October 2010, Craig called John Burnett out of the blue. "I explained to him that not only was I his spiritual great-grandson, but that the fruit of his life has been felt around the world through Ray, Rodd, me, and countless others. As we chatted on my cell phone, I patched in Rodd in New Hampshire and Ray in Maryland. We had the most amazing telephone reunion, something we look forward to more fully in Heaven."

"I thank God for John, Ray, and Rodd," Craig said. "These men are like the good seed in Jesus' parable in Mark 4. They were good seed in good soil that has borne fruit 100-fold."



Photo courtesy of Craig Parker.

Craig Parker, Rodd Hersey, and Ray Namie