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LIFE OF ADVENTURE HAS NOW TURNED INTO FIGHT AGAINST ILLNESS

By Doug Moe

THE HARDEST part of telling you about my friend Charlie Lanphear is where to start. When he was shipwrecked in the Philippines? Jailed in Singapore? Deep-sea diving in Borneo? His life has been a Hemingway novel, or a Bogart script.

When I saw him the last time, five years ago at the Avenue Bar, Charlie was going to put a kayak on top of his van and drive to Alaska. In the interim I had wondered about him but not worried, because I have never met anyone so self-sufficient. The tone of his e-mail this week was likewise encouraging.

"What's happening in your miserable life?" he asked.

There was a phone number, an area code I didn't recognize. We spoke Thursday. We laughed a bunch, and then, toward the end, he said all too casually that not too long ago he'd found this lump on his neck. Now there were doctors and treatments, and his world was getting smaller. Even pirates get old.

Lanphear is a familiar name around Madison. Charlie's father, George Lanphear, was an assistant football coach at the University of Wisconsin. George was also the ring announcer during the great days of college boxing at the UW Field House. Charlie's older brother, Dan Lanphear, was a standout football player at Madison West High School and then with the Badgers, where he earned All-American honors as a lineman. Dan was inducted into the Madison Sports Hall of Fame in 1989.

Charlie had Dan's physical gifts but not his discipline, athletically or otherwise. Dan is a successful businessman in the Chicago area. "I would die on the vine," Charlie once told me, "if I was in an office for one day."

He joined the Marines out of West High. The service was his first ticket to see the world. After boot camp in San Diego, Charlie went to Okinawa and then to Vietnam, where, working in operations, he discharged Marines into the Central Intelligence Agency.

Lanphear was discharged himself in 1962 and came home to Madison, where he spent a memorable few years working as a bouncer on State Street. His favorite bar was the Varsity, where Tommy Thompson was a bartender. Lanphear was sitting in a State Street bar when an old friend sat down beside him and said: "I'm living in Aspen. It's more fun than you've ever had in your life. You should come out."

Aspen would be his base for the next two decades. The home where I once visited him was outside of town and on the side of a

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mountain. There was a huge deck. Aspen was not yet more expensive than Manhattan, but there were people around with both money and free time. Some of them realized pretty quickly that Charlie Lanphear was a good guy to have riding shotgun, no matter what the endeavor. He could build a house, navigate a boat by the stars and clear a dive mask in a hundred feet of water.

In 1971, Lanphear found himself in Taiwan, where he and a buddy, Greg Lott, were helping a wealthy friend build a seaworthy sailboat. They were aboard the Steppenwolf, en route to Manila, when Typhoon Lucy hit and washed them up on a small island. It took six weeks to repair the boat, and relatives in the United States had received State Department telegrams saying they were missing. Once they were sailing again, they stopped in Borneo. I can remember Charlie's vivid description of a coral garden he had seen while scuba diving. It was possible, he said, that he was the first human to see it.

The guns they carried for safety became an issue when they sailed into Singapore. Their plan was to sell the guns and buy motorcycles. They would bike through Burma, ending up in Munich for the 1972 Summer Olympics. Instead, they ended up in a Singapore prison. It was illegal to possess firearms in Singapore. Charlie showed me a newspaper headline from The Straits Times: "Americans Admit Having Firearms: Weapons to Fight Pirates They Say." It was two years or an \$8,000 fine. Lanphear and Lott were jailed until money wired from the United States arrived.

Charlie was back in Aspen when we met in the late 1980s. I wrote a magazine story about him, and after that, we stayed in touch. He spent some happy years in Hawaii, doing construction work and paying \$225 to live in a shack he'd refurbished on a banana plantation. He came back to Madison five years ago, when his brother Phil died. There was a gathering in Phil's memory at the Avenue.

Phil had battled cancer; now it's Charlie fighting illness. He's 67, and sounded good on the phone from northern Arizona, where he has lived for a year. The closest town is Prescott Valley. "Mile-high country," Charlie called it. His longtime partner in adventure, Greg Lott, is in New Zealand and has asked Charlie to come down. The diving is incredible. I hope he goes.

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