

A different kind of Wrigley Field love story

Aug. 8, 1988: the first night game at Wrigley Field. The Cubs played the Phillies on a sticky, then thundering, then rainy evening under artificial light. The game eventually was called on account of weather. Outside the park, hours earlier, an array of Chicagoans including many Vietnam war veterans gathered to protest Wrigley's unwillingness to fly a POW/MIA flag, honoring prisoners of war and those missing in action.

Bob Brieske, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran who enlisted at 17 and served in Vietnam in 1968 and 1969, was there that night. So was Judy Fischer. "That's where we met," she says. "We were friends for a year, then we dated for a year, then we were engaged for a year, and then we got married in 1991." Fischer changed her name to Brieske. Their two daughters, Taylor and Teri, are now 27 and 25. After 21 days in the hospital Advocate Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, Bob Brieske died April 8 of acute respiratory failure caused by pneumonia and brought on by COVID-19. Brieske, his widow said Thursday, was a fierce patriot and a veteran who believed in extending a hand. Each December he traveled to Washington D.C. to honor fallen service members as part of the Wreaths Across America program. "Courageous. Resilient. A true fighter. And selfless." Those are daughter Taylor's words for her late father. "He was always willing to give more than he had. Like so many veterans who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, my dad believed in helping his brothers. I can't tell you how many other vets have come through with sympathy cards, and from what they wrote, he literally saved lives." Returning from the war, Brieske worked as a lineman electrician for various contractors before being hired by the City of Chicago Bureau of Electricity, as it was then called. He retired in 2011. Daughter Teri recalls: "He had a sense of humor that was just beyond anything you'd ever see. He always found a way to make somebody laugh or smile. He found a way to lighten up the room." She tells the story of both daughters heading off to their respective colleges for the first time, on the same day. Bob and Judy sent them off with supplies for their dorm rooms, including a toolkit. Underneath the tools, Bob tucked a note with a familiar phone number. The note read: "If all else fails, call Dad." Brieske's final weeks, Judy says, "did not start with the typical symptoms – coughing, fever, shortness of breath, that kind of thing." He thought he'd wrenched his back, which was not uncommon for him; he'd had two back surgeries in his lifetime already. A few days later he was in bed with gastrointestinal pain and fatigue. On March 19 Judy went to the grocery store. By the time she returned her husband was coughing violently with a sudden 103-degree temperature. "We took him in," Judy recalls. "And we never saw him again." His heart was never in great shape, Judy says, from his exposure to Agent Orange while serving in Vietnam. Yet as his kidneys and lungs deteriorated in his final days, she says, his heart "turned out to be the strongest organ in his body."

Near the end, the care team at Lutheran General managed to place a plastic-wrapped cellphone up to Bob's ear, so that Judy, Taylor and Teri could say goodbye. "We just...pushed the words into him," Taylor recalls, "with the hope that he heard, and

understood.” On the morning of the final day, the family was allowed up to the intensive care unit floor. Outside his room, separated by glass, they offered words of peace and remembrance to him by phone, with Bob just a few feet away. During the final weeks Bob’s cousin, Dr. Elise Barney of Phoenix, Ariz., a nephrologist, spent what Taylor calls “countless hours” consulting with physicians, providing care and emotional support. “She truly fought for my father’s life,” Taylor says. Brieske was a longtime member of the City Heat Motorcycle Club, in addition to the nonprofit Vietnam Veterans of America. “Every time he met a vet,” Taylor says, “he’d tell them: ‘If you have some free time, come on out and meet us for coffee.’” The meeting place was, and remains, the Dunkin’ Donuts at Harlem and Dempster in Morton Grove. Judy says sometimes 80 or more veterans gather there to share information and conversation. Brieske dreamed of returning to Vietnam in peacetime. More than once, Judy says, her late husband’s best friend invited him to visit him in Greece. No, Bob said. Not until I get back to Vietnam first. For 19 years Judy Brieske has worked as a clerk in the Chicago Public Schools system, currently at Wildwood Elementary School. In addition to his wife and daughters, Robert Brieske is survived by a four-year-old grandson, Michael. The family plans to scatter Brieske’s ashes in Vietnam, when the pandemic and finances allow. “We know that’s what he would’ve wanted,” Judy says.



-Michael Phillips