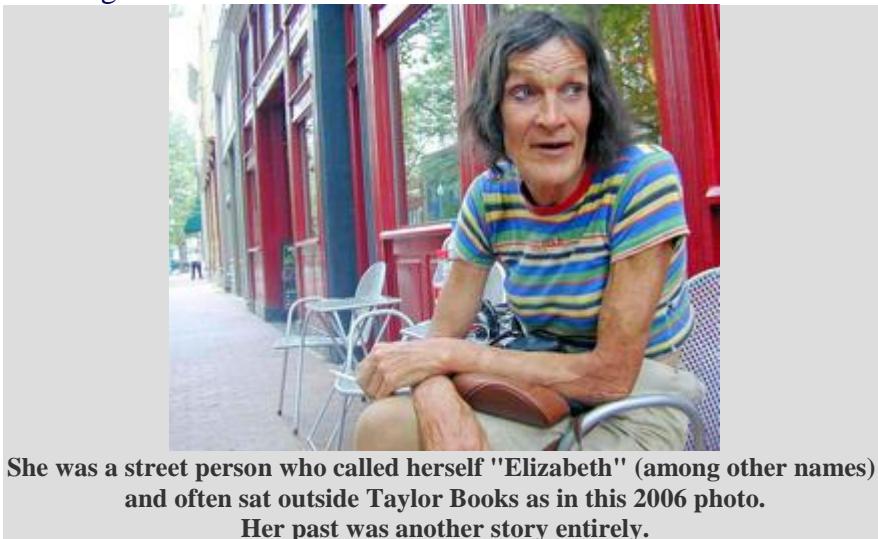


<http://www.wvgazette.com/News/201306010016>



By Douglas Imbrogno



She was a street person who called herself "Elizabeth" (among other names) and often sat outside Taylor Books as in this 2006 photo.
Her past was another story entirely.

Part 1: Elizabeth in Charleston

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- This is a story about a woman named Elizabeth.

At least, that's what she called herself. Other people gave her other names. Some were cruel in the offhand way a city's residents and cops nickname disheveled street people.

"Swamp Thing," they called her. Or "Shim" -- short for "she-him."

A few years ago, Elizabeth could routinely be found downtown. You might find her propped against a wall in the sunshine or seated in front of Taylor Books. Her long stick legs were covered by rumpled, caramel-brown stockings, topped by a road-worn nondescript cloth skirt or dress. The stockings plunged into raggedy knit boots or lace-up ballerina shoes.

Her face -- framed by scraggly black hair -- bore a hundred lines etched into the skin. Her mouth was missing many teeth. Yet she could beam a grin and was pleasant when spoken to. She might even offer to let you listen to tunes on the hand-held recorder she often clutched.

"I'm a singer-songwriter," she once told me in her husky yet soft voice. I crouched one day in June 2006 to say hello as she sat beside a mailbox along Virginia Street. "I'm recording songs to send to Geffen Records."

Crazy, I thought. But she was nice in an unexpected way, given how she looked.

It would turn out Elizabeth was not some mad-as-a-hatter street person although she apparently wrestled with mental-health issues.

She was also biologically-speaking not a woman although the course of her adult life was defined by her trying to be one, in her dress and in her mind.

She was born George L. Bartlett in Lafe, Arkansas. And she was a singer-songwriter and reportedly quite a good one.

[Ric Ocasek](#), leader of the prominent late '70s and early '80s band The Cars, thought so highly of George "Geo" Bartlett's music that he once tried to find him through a shout-out in the pages of Rolling Stone magazine, remarking that "his songs are amazing."

That was in the years before everything that happened, happened. That was before a son and beloved brother disappeared from an Oklahoma family's embrace for more than a quarter-century.

For this is a tale of not just one person but a family. And of a city that helped to reunite them. This was a family that never stopped praying George would reappear someday.

And he did reappear. But as someone who now called herself "Leah Elizabeth Wingfield."

She resurfaced on the streets of the capital city of West Virginia. And Charlestonians would play a key role in helping Elizabeth/George find her way back home into the arms of three sisters and a mother who dearly longed to see and hold the person lost to them for decades.

Aka Elizabeth

In early February, Amy Weintraub, former director of Covenant House whose programs look out for needy and homeless people, emailed *The Charleston Gazette* an obituary from an Arkansas newspaper:

George L. Bartlett (a.k.a. Elizabeth), 59, of Tulsa, Oklahoma, journeyed to heaven on Thursday, February 7th, 2013. He was born in Lafe, Arkansas on November 20, 1953 to James L. (Jim) Bartlett and Fern Rigdon Bartlett. He is preceded in death by his father Jim Bartlett, his

grandparents Ezra L. and Nannie Easter Bartlett and Jess and Alice Rigdon. He is survived by his mother Fern Rigdon Bartlett of Malvern, stepmother Lois Bartlett of Conway, and his adoring sisters, Sharon Bartlett of North Little Rock, Arkansas; Leigh Ann Keller of Broken Arrow, Okla.; and Lisa Marie Davis of Sherwood, Arkansas.

After naming other relatives, the obituary went on:

George was a profound songwriter and musician. He will be so deeply missed by all. We would like to thank all of you for the many prayers prayed throughout the 27 years George was missing from our family. Your prayers and the ones who knew, cared for, and befriended him along life's journey were instrumental in his return which filled the void, closed the gap, and healed our broken hearts.

George? Elizabeth?

First things first. I had to piece together my own handful of encounters with Elizabeth who had been George. Who had been who exactly?

On the street

Back in 2006, I used to publish the *Gazette* photoblog "Downtown WV: Life in Urban West Virginia." I wrote of several encounters with Elizabeth in Charleston during which I snapped some of the photos seen with this article. The pronouns in the posts excerpted below reflected the gender puzzlement of these encounters.

Downtown WV: April 6, 2006:

"Can I take your picture?" I asked.

"Will you pay me?" Elizabeth asked.

I gave her \$10. S/he wanted me to use a shot that didn't show her bad teeth. Elizabeth is quite sweet.

Downtown WV: July 18, 2006:

We ran into our street friend Elizabeth (though we have been told by others who have spoken to him/her that the name given has been Mary, Peter, and Peter Pan). S/he was her usual cheery self (s/he really is kind of sweet) and posed for a couple of close-ups, sitting cross-legged against the wall of Capitol Roasters on Summers Street. She says her recording project is continuing apace as she seeks a publisher for her songs.

"Come back and visit anytime," she said in parting.

Which led us as we walked away to wonder: "Come back and visit where?"

A notable friend

Of the many people interviewed for this article, no one is sure exactly when Elizabeth arrived in Charleston. Just that one day perhaps a decade or so ago, there she was.

She took her place among the crew of regular downtown street folk. These included Bill Dunn (known as "Aqualung") who inspired [the homeless guy Nick Nolte depicted](#) in "Down and Out in Beverly Hills."

Christened with her own leper-like nickname "Swamp Thing," Elizabeth's generally mild demeanor won her fans and friends. Notable among them was Leslie Clay, the daughter of Lyell B. Clay, a prominent West Virginia businessman whose family owned the Charleston Daily Mail and other media properties. The city's showcase performance venue the Clay Center was named after the family whose Clay Foundation donated nearly \$60 million to its creation.

Leslie Clay pointed her life in another direction, earning a master's in divinity from San Francisco Theological Seminary and a doctorate from the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. She and her husband Carl Agsten have been doing mission work with the Council of Protestant Churches in Nicaragua. Via email, she recalled when she first noticed Elizabeth.

"I'm a big fan of coffee. So I started seeing her often in front of Capitol Roasters on the corner of Summers and Quarrier streets," said Clay. "I don't think I was aware of getting involved in her story. More just a feeling that I didn't want to walk away."

But involved she got.

She and Agsten had already helped the man who many in the city called "Aqualung" known for pushing a shopping cart piled higher than his head with a hoarder's collection of plastic bags filled with who-knew-what stuff.

"Carl and I had purchased a little home on the backside of Dixie Street for our friend Bill Dunn. Bill lived there for about a year and a half. He would park his amazing shopping cart in the laundry room like it was a garage."

One day, Dunn wheeled his cart away and disappeared. He has not been seen since.

His exit created a home for someone else.

"Elizabeth moved into the house after Bill left," Clay said.

The Samaritan

"Elizabeth was a friendly person and enjoyed connecting," Clay said. "As we talked more, I began understanding how vulnerable she was. And how lonely. It was hard for me to see. So

Carl and I began inviting her to come to our house or helping her record her music. We saw her almost every week at our home or at a coffee shop."

She shared Thanksgiving dinner at the couple's home. One time, Agsten helped Elizabeth mail a recording of her songs to singer Jennifer Lopez. Elizabeth was invited to pick out clothes and jewelry she liked from among Clay's own possessions.

Elizabeth had the semblance of a family again.

"She got to hold our daughter Ella when she was a baby and I could see that this was very special for her," said Clay. "She would often try to give me money or buy me things as a way of thanking me. She bought thoughtful Christmas presents for each member of our family."

What drew Clay to become so deeply involved?

"Elizabeth was one of the kindest people I ever met. She was incredibly vulnerable. But she was also tenacious," Clay recalled. "At times, I was blown away by the injustices she faced."

She and Elizabeth traveled to a bus station one day to get an ID card she needed for housing. The woman at the window refused to touch the papers Elizabeth passed over. "They might make me sick!" she said, disgusted.

Clay was incensed. "Elizabeth had doors closed too often. I liked being her advocate and making it harder for people to say 'No!' because I was with her."

Growing up, Clay said, she couldn't stand to see anyone picked on. "I guess I still can't. When a person's life is so obviously difficult, I want to do what I can to lighten their load."

"I also think I was listening in Sunday school. God couldn't be clearer about how we are to treat our neighbor. The Good Samaritan didn't just nod and smile and walk by without looking his neighbor in the eye. He didn't just drop the wounded man in a clinic. He spent the night with him in the inn."

One time, Elizabeth agreed to talk with a youth group at Clay's church First Presbyterian.

"She did share a lot about her life and her dreams. But not about her past," Clay recalled. "The youths had some thoughtful questions about whether she wanted to start a family. She said she would like to find a partner and have children."

As for this other person George Bartlett?

"She was always 'Elizabeth' to me. She never talked to me about being George," said Clay. "We didn't talk about her family or where she was from. I may have asked some questions, but she shied away from answering them. So I backed off."

Where are you, Geo?

Interviews with 3 younger sisters and with old bandmates, decades-old issues of *Rolling Stone*, and recordings by "Geo" Bartlett reveal another life entirely.

George played in a series of bands with names like Krunch and NiteLife.

He was briefly married to a woman adored by George's youngest sister, then quickly divorced.

He seemed always to have been footloose bouncing from town-to-town, state-to-state as family and friends tried to keep up with his whereabouts. Even *Rolling Stone* noted his wandering ways in an April 3, 1980 "Random Notes" mention which described how his music had caught the ear of a prominent band leader of the day:

"Cars leader Ric Ocasek thinks he's discovered one of the next great rockers of the Eighties. Now if only he could find the guy! ... 'From what I know, his name's "Geo" Bartlett,' Ocasek says. 'I don't know if I'll ever find him. But it would be so great if I did because I would immediately do something with him. His songs are amazing and his voice is so unique.' "

George's Arkansas musician friends from back in the day tell how he encouraged them to listen to new music out of New York and Boston by bands like Blondie and The Cars. They tell how they got a cassette tape of his music into Ocasek's hands.

His sisters Sharon, Leigh Ann, and Lisa fill in gaps in the family history. The way they looked up to their older brother. The way one of them wanted to sing in his band when she got older.

And the way things got strange in small-town Arkansas after George revealed something his family could not handle. And then, how George went away for a very, very long time.

And 'Elizabeth' took over the story of his life.

Part 2: A musician on the go -- then gone

It was a big house. But nothing could absorb the racket radiating from the basement of the Arkansas home of George Bartlett, his parents, and 3 younger sisters.

George and his boyhood friend and fellow Boy Scout John Shepherd were swept up in the Beatlemania that ensued after the Beatles landed in 1964 to wild acclaim in New York followed by an "Ed Sullivan Show" appearance.

"After seeing the Beatles, we knew we had to have a band. He decided he was going to be the drummer," Shepherd said.

But with what? With no drum kit at hand, George used whatever he could find around his white pillared house beside the railroad tracks in the town of Corning. Pots and pans. Trash cans. Cooking utensils.

Upstairs, the rest of the family grimaced. Especially after George progressed to an actual drum kit which ratcheted the decibel level even higher. "It would just about drive us crazy," recalled Sharon Bartlett, oldest of George's sisters.

As the boys moved into high school, they played for the dances held after football games. What was the name of the band?

"That's where they just called us 'Live Band,'" said Shepherd who now lives in Bowden, Ark.

They did eventually have band names. General Electric. Backyard Witchcraft. Mammoth. The Muleskinner Blues Band (except that they spelled the word 'band' as 'banned').

"We had a million names. Nothing stuck," said Shepherd.

But George was dead serious about becoming a musician. Growing up, he kept his ears tuned to the latest music and introduced the sounds he heard and loved to small-town Arkansas.

Steve Mcelyea -- who went on to play guitar with Ronnie Milsap and the Christian group The Imperials -- was another high school bandmate.

"The local progressive music station at that time was FM-100 in Memphis. Sometimes George would record something off of that and he'd bring it when we'd get together. We'd listen to it as best we could pick it up and learn the songs."

This was about 1968-69, Mcelyea said. George, born in 1953, would have been 16 or so.

"I had a little red Farfisa organ and I played bass with my left hand. Kind of like what The Doors were doing. They were an influence to us," said Mcelyea. "We were doing Vanilla Fudge and stuff like that. Kind of psychedelic music. The stuff we were doing was not quite the norm."

The family might be cringing upstairs. But the sisters were taking note. George's youngest sister Lisa Marie Davis was entranced by the star quality of her handsome musical brother and the songs his bands attempted.

"George used to play 'More Than a Feeling' by Boston. To this day, that is still one of my favorite songs. I used to want to be part of that band growing up," she remembered. "I'm telling you that he was on the verge of stardom!"

That may sound like a star-struck kid sister who idolized her older brother. It might except for what happened a few years later when George's talent got called out in the pages of *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Twice.

Krunch time

"Johnny's good lookin'/ He likes cookin'/ He doesn't smile / For he's sad all the while/ But Johnny's good lookin' .../ He has a fine motor car / Got his baggage in back / They say he's off his sprocket / Says he's going somewhere ..."

~from "Johnny's Good Lookin' Motorcar" by George Bartlett

Other bands followed as George improved as a player.

Krunch was one. He wrangled time at a studio for another group called NiteLife. In 1979, the band pressed a 45 rpm of two of George's songs "Marathon Man" and "Johnny's Good Lookin' Motorcar" with George on vocals, keyboards, and drums, and Shepherd on guitar and another friend, Rick Buford on bass. (An unknown female singer adds backing vocals. But as George pieced the song together from different recording sessions, Shepherd and Buford don't recall her name.) They released the 45 independently on "Uncut Records Ltd."

Buford, a registered nurse in Jonesboro, Ark. who at 58 still plays guitar and bass regularly with his band The Lowdown Saints, also played with George in Krunch at Batesville High School. "He introduced me to some early Steve Miller. Traffic. Black Sabbath. I could go on and on. It was intriguing," said Buford. "I left the group I was playing with to start playing with him."

Buford went off for a stint at the University of Arkansas in 1975. He lost track of his friend. In 1978, he dropped out of college and moved back to Batesville. George tracked him down, then moved in with him to work on music.

This was at a time when a flood of angular pop music, often driven by synthesizers and jangly guitars, swept out of clubs in New York, Boston, and elsewhere. Spun from the punk movement and dubbed New Wave, the music had a more eclectic, melodic and polished sound. As ever, George had his musical antennae up in the wind.

"He dropped by and turned me on to some of the new stuff that was coming out with The Cars and Blondie and some of the groups at that time," said Buford. "We had access to a studio and we went up there after hours to mess around."

By this time, George had taught himself to play keyboard. With contributions from other players, they cut some rough tracks, recording them to cassette tape. When **The Cars**, one of the biggest New Wave acts, played a tour stop in the region, Buford and his friend hopped in a car to go hear them cassette tape in hand.

"There wasn't much of a label on the cassette. It said 'Geo' Bartlett (short for 'George') and a phone number," Buford remembered. "That phone number on the cassette was my home phone. I didn't think any more about it."

During the concert, the two made their move.

"We handed that cassette tape to the sound guy who was mixing the show. George asked him if he could get that into the hands of Ric Ocasek," said Buford, chuckling at the memory. "It was a shot in the dark."

Where's Geo?

"Spoke of fortune he believed/ Was just a figment or a state of mind/ Nothin's left to show but life.../But life. And life's so unkind..."

~ from "Marathon Man" by George Bartlett

The concert came and went. Time passed.

One evening, Buford had worked all night, collapsing into sleep at his house. George by this time had begun roaming couch-to-couch, town-to-town. "George had since moved on somewhere else. He did that. He would come and go," Buford said.

It was perhaps 9 or 10 a.m. The phone stirred to life. Startled out of sleep, Buford grabbed for the receiver. "Hi, this is Ric Ocasek of The Cars," the voice on the other end said. He wanted to get in touch with this "Geo" Bartlett fellow.

Groggy from sleep, Buford thought it might be a prank call but played along.

"He was inquiring about the tape. He liked it. He thought it was cutting-edge material. He compared it to Brian Eno's stuff," Buford recalled. "I was thrilled. I bought into it initially."

Buford said he didn't know where Bartlett was. He hung up, doubts growing. "I had some prankster friends who would do something like that," he said.

A while later, another call came. But the Boston accent now sounded fake. Buford was feeling more sure that he was the target of a prank.

"I think Ric got the hint he might be talking to the wrong guy or he sensed my impatience. It probably left a bad taste in his mouth during that second call."

No more calls came. Ocasek shifted his search straight to the "Random Notes" section of the April 3, 1980 issue of *Rolling Stone*:

Cars leader Ric Ocasek thinks he's discovered one of the next great rockers of the Eighties. Now if only he could find the guy! ... "From what I know, his name's Geo Bartlett," Ocasek says.

"He gave me a tape in Memphis when we were there on tour although I don't exactly remember him giving it to me. I brought it home and totally flipped. He had a phone number on the tape. But every time I called, the person on the other end got real mad and said, 'He moved out of the state, don't call again.'

"I don't know if I'll ever find him. But it would be so great if I did because I would immediately do something with him. His songs are amazing, and his voice is so unique. It's hard to explain. It just doesn't sound like anything that would come out of Memphis. What's he doin'?"

"Good question," the Random Notes item concluded. "If you're out there, Geo (short for George?), call Random Notes and we'll put you in touch with Ric."

But where was George "Geo" Bartlett?

George had begun "to lose his way" as his sister Sharon put it, about the time of their parents' divorce in 1977 after 25 years of marriage. "He would find vacant houses to live in that had no electricity," she said. "He stated he didn't need it anyway, as it bothered him and he would use candles for light."

But the magazine item electrified George's friends. They tracked him down. George got in touch with *Rolling Stone*. The magazine hooked him up with Ocasek.

Ocasek apparently brought Bartlett to his Boston studio. It is not clear what happened there.

Ocasek -- in the midst of a recording project, his management firm said -- did not respond to several *Gazette* queries about what happened next. George's Arkansas musician friends don't know for certain.

One thing was for certain, though. A young musician nicknamed 'Geo' seemed like a hot property in spring 1980.

"It was a shocker," said his boyhood friend John Shepherd who thought that he, George, and crew might be on their way up the pop music totem pole.

"I went out and bought a new car," Shepherd said -- a Mustang GT. "It kind of pushed me over the edge because I thought we were going somewhere."

The next month, *Rolling Stone* updated news of Ocasek's potential Next Big Thing in a long Random Notes item in the May 15, 1980 issue. The magazine had tracked Geo to St. Louis where he was studying (of all things!) to be a hairdresser:

"Don't ask me why," says the soft-spoken 26-year-old multi-instrumentalist. "I moved here to be with my girlfriend who wanted to go to school to be a chiropractor. Now she's left to become a minister."

George told *Rolling Stone* he was recording new songs onto a Sansui cassette deck. The item also noted that *Rolling Stone* had put him in touch "with a delighted Ocasek who hopes to record Bartlett sometime in the Fall."

The piece concluded with what sounded like the start of something big:

"Meanwhile, with the Cars busy working on their next album, Bartlett has sent Ocasek more tapes to consider: "They're rough," he admits. "But Ric says that's the way he likes 'em."

Opening the door

Family and friends are not sure of the exact date (possibly late 1979). But George took a trip to New York City sometime before Ric Ocasek flipped a national spotlight upon his life. George returned from the city and shared a bombshell with his middle sister Leigh Ann Keller.

Leigh Ann, 8 years younger, was a senior in high school at the time. "He and I were very, very close and he would confide in me," she said. "So we went back in the bedroom. He showed me a magazine and it was all these men in drag. He proceeded to share with me that he wanted to be a woman."

This was at end of the '70s in small-town Bible-belt Arkansas.

"Back then, I mean, you just didn't hear of things like that," she said. "I just kind of freaked out. I didn't know how to handle it. He was my only brother. I just absolutely idolized him. All my sisters did."

The bombshell landed even harder given that George had once been married in the mid-70s. Leigh Ann described her brother's short marriage to a young woman with whom the family has since lost contact.

"They were married for maybe a couple of years and then all of a sudden they got a divorce," she said. "After the divorce, he was very, very sad."

The news that came back from his New York trip began to ripple outward.

Sharon, closest in age to her brother, picks up the thread.

"We lived in a small community. We didn't understand," she said. "We told him we didn't want another sister. We wanted our brother."

It didn't help that their father and George had a contentious relationship even as George once worked briefly at his dad's realty company.

"My dad didn't want him to play music as a career. He wanted him to have another career," said Leigh Ann. "So as he got older and everything, they fought a lot. It was very, very difficult for him."

Here and there around town, George began to dress as a woman. Word got out. His oldest friend John Shepherd, got a call one day from George's dad.

"His father called me, asked me if I'd see him dressed up like a girl? I told him no but I've seen pictures. He told me: 'Well if you ever do, just whup his butt for me!'"

'Quite a scene'

Given the time George lived under his roof, Rick Buford may have seen most intensely how much his friend wanted to radically redraw his life. His entire identity in fact.

After the second *Rolling Stone* mention, Buford drove to St. Louis and brought George back to Arkansas to get to work on new music for Ocasek. "I was terribly excited," said Buford.

He overheard phone conversations George had with the leader of The Cars.

"George was just seeking advice on how to handle it and what recommendations Ocasek might have for him and us. And Ocasek said 'Just keep doing what you're doing, polish it up, do some public performances. You know, get a following. And I'm going to try to get the group up here to Boston and we do...'"

Buford paused. "Whatever Ric does. Produce it."

But George had become a little different, Buford said. He began to dress in women's clothes around Buford's place even as friends dropped by, he said. "I'm sure at that time it was quite a scene for the residents of Batesville, Arkansas."

George wanted him to be his boyfriend, Buford would come to learn. But after a few months, the weight of it all sent Buford packing.

By this time, many locals knew of "Geo" Bartlett via *Rolling Stone*.

"I said, 'George, we're in a small town here. People are coming and going, they're sticking their noses in our door. They're extremely curious about what we're doing.' Because by that time, the word had gotten out that we could possibly be something that was going to put the city on the map."

Buford left, moving to a different apartment outside of town. "I told him I just could not do this anymore."

Meanwhile, the family's turmoil only increased.

"Dad tried to put him into a mental hospital," Leigh Ann said. "And he somehow got released from the mental hospital and lived with my mother for awhile in a little town."

And then?

"After that, he left," she said. "And we never saw him again."

The two older sisters living in different places last saw their brother in 1982 while the youngest Lisa spent a few months with him in the summer of 1983 at their mother's place. Then he disappeared.

He went missing for a few months.

Then a year. Then 5 years.

And then 10 years. And 20.

Gone, finally, for more than a quarter century.

One day in late 2009, a phone rings in Arkansas in the house of George's Aunt Bernice. It was a call from Charleston, West Virginia. From that one call, telephones started lighting up across Arkansas and Oklahoma.

'George is alive! He's in West Virginia!'

But he doesn't call himself George anymore. She calls herself Elizabeth.

And she wants to see her family again.

Part 3: A long-sought reunion

George "Geo" Bartlett was gone.

No one knows the lonely roads and byways, the towns, and states that lay between George's exit from Arkansas and Elizabeth's arrival a quarter-century or so later in Charleston, West Virginia.

They could not have been easy years. The roadmap of her travels might well be said to be written in her gaunt wiry frame, the trail-worn clothes she wore day after day, and a face crisscrossed with lines.

George had walked off from his Arkansas family in 1983 at age 29 after he told those who loved him that he would rather be a woman. When he left his home state far behind, he also left 'George' behind.

It is not clear when he began to call himself 'Elizabeth' (among other names) full-time. But he was determined to dress and identify as a woman whatever the fallout to his life and to all who'd known him as a handsome young musician whose music had once been talked up in *Rolling Stone*.

It is also not clear how deeply Elizabeth suffered from some strain of mental illness which contributed to her wandering flight from all she once knew.

What is known is that sometime early in the first decade of the 21st century what looked to be a stooped-but-tall homeless woman missing many teeth shuffled into town. In her hands, she clutched a handheld recorder. She was still making songs.

Beseeching Heaven

Back in Arkansas the years rolled by. The Bartlett family undertook the hard work of acceptance, beseeching Heaven to look after a long-missing brother and son.

"Not a day would fly that we didn't think about him," said Sharon Bartlett, one of George's 3 sisters. "We believe in intervention prayer. We just prayed for his safety. We prayed he was not hungry. We prayed he had shelter."

He apparently made it to Boston about 1980-81 to record at the studio of Ric Ocasek, band leader of The Cars, who had praised young George's music in *Rolling Stone*. Ocasek did not respond to several *Gazette* queries sent to his management firm.

Then George apparently deserted that city too, said Sharon.

The reason they know he was gone from Boston is that Ocasek and their father had a phone conversation and the singer "just basically told him he had left," she said. "We don't know if they were disgruntled with each other, if he left on a bad note or what."

George spent some time in a little town in Arkansas in 1983 where his mother lived. Then he disappeared.

Family members went on with their lives, always looking over a shoulder for him. George's father -- initially disturbed and angered by his son's revelations and now heartbroken at the estrangement -- tried finding him through the Social Security system.

Somewhere along the way, George apparently legally changed his name to "Leah Elizabeth Wingfield." The family learned that Leah Elizabeth Wingfield had begun receiving disability checks, possibly as a result of what middle sister Leigh Ann believes may have been a diagnosis of schizophrenia. "I don't know for sure. But he had a disability check," she said.

The family made a video they hoped might reach George if they could pierce the government bureaucracy and get it to him. Leigh Ann recalled its making.

"My dad actually said, 'You guys will address her as "Leah".' It's so heart-wrenching. We're all crying and my dad is begging Leah: 'Come back to your family!' He's saying, 'If you will come back, we will accept you as you are.' "

The video never got to him. Jim Bartlett died in 2006 without ever seeing his son again.

"We married and raised our families," said Sharon, oldest of George's sisters. "He didn't know he had nieces and nephews. We just lived our lives the best we could without him."

One decade passed, then two. The family's prayers included one very specific one:

"May George find kindness. May he be embraced by kind people that will accept him and care about him."

And lo and behold, that prayer was answered!

Winning trust

Elizabeth's time on the Charleston streets -- often hanging about Taylor Books or the old Capital Roasters -- was not without incident.

"I heard she could get angry and even that she had thrown a shoe at one of the café workers," said her friend and benefactor Leslie Clay. "But in my 4 years of knowing Elizabeth, she was never once mean or angry toward me. I imagine she sometimes just got fed up with the way people would treat her."

After Clay and her husband Carl Agsten decided to head to Central America for mission work, they donated a small home on Dixie Street to Covenant House. They bought it first for Bill Dunn -- a street person known as "Aqualung" -- as a place to call home. Elizabeth moved in after Dunn disappeared one day.

So now Elizabeth had the people at Covenant House looking out for her, among them Briana Martin, Phil Hainen, Amy Weintraub and Crystal Good. They guided her to more supervised housing and assistance, trying to figure out how best to help.

"We were all just eager to win her friendship and win her trust," said Weintraub, then director of Covenant House.

Elizabeth could be inadvertently destructive while tinkering and trying to make things, she said. "She might take apart the thermostat to use it as a new camera she was trying to invent. It wasn't intentional destruction."

She also made songs, took phone pictures, concocted little sculptures out of spoons and knobs and stuff as gifts.

"She would bring me videos she'd made. They were often disjointed and impossible to follow. But it did give you a hint she was desperately trying to communicate. That's part of what made her so endearing to all of us," said Weintraub.

Good (Covenant House's assistant director at the time,) recalled her first Elizabeth encounter. One chilly day she spotted Elizabeth on the street in a skirt, thin stockings, and sandals. Good purchased a pair of warmer stockings at a drugstore. She went to give them to her.

"She absolutely refused," Good said.

Years later, they had a more fruitful meeting. One that would reverberate across several states and lives.

One day in late fall 2009, Elizabeth walked into Good's office. In her quiet small voice, she said: "I want you to help me find my family."

"I took a deep breath and I said, 'Well, how long has it been since you've seen your family?'" Good recalled. "It was this huge number."

Elizabeth hadn't seen them since the early 1980s!

What finally prompted Elizabeth's wish to reconnect? Perhaps her closeness with Leslie Clay's family, holding Clay and Agsten's children, sitting at their Thanksgiving table? Was it her age, now in her mid-50s?

No one knew for sure. But Good knew what to do next.

"I said let me get started. I Googled a couple names. I called. I left messages. I said, 'This is Crystal in Covenant House in Charleston, West Virginia. We may have a relative here with your same last name.' Just a generic message. You also had to be careful about identity and things like that."

When she came to work the next day, "I had at least 30 messages on my phone," Good said. "It was like an Oprah moment. So I was just an instrument, I was just the connector. It was just meant to be. What struck me was the messages. They were so happy!"

The reunion

George's youngest sister Lisa had last seen him when she was 13 during a hot Arkansas summer in 1983. He taught her how to drive his standard-shift white Mustang, she remembered happily. "He took me to some hills and made me drive home!"

When he wasn't roaming, he might sit Indian style in his room, incense burning, lost in thought. She can still visualize his Bible beside him, underlined and marked with his notes.

By winter of that year, he was gone. As the years piled up, it looked like he was gone for good.

"I think I grew up kind of mad. At people. At life. I was mad that he left," said Lisa. "Growing up there was always this void and emptiness."

Then the day came more than a quarter century later that she saw her brother again in the community room of Covenant House. Or she saw who George had become.



family photo

After wandering away and being separated for more than a quarter century, Elizabeth was reunited with her three sisters in 2009 with the help of Covenant House in Charleston.

In November 2009, Lisa, her 2 sisters Leigh Ann and Sharon, and their mother Fern Rigdon Bartlett drove as soon as they could from Arkansas to Charleston. They had been prepped by Covenant House's Weintraub and Martin the night before the reunion.

Elizabeth was scared and full of anxiety, Martin recalled. "She was very standoffish. I was very fearful she would run."

The middle sister Leigh Ann recalled the moment 'Elizabeth' entered the room.

"We put Mom in front and then we put Sharon behind Mom because Sharon is the oldest. Me in the middle, Lisa being the baby at the end. We just all went in single file and embraced Elizabeth."

Weintraub watched a scene she described as "one of the most positive and significant events of my life and certainly my time at Covenant House."

Elizabeth didn't show a lot of emotion those first hours, Weintraub said. "I'm sure she was in some state of shock. But the sisters were amazing. They were just so loving and warm. And they called her 'Elizabeth' from the beginning."

'We just melted'

Even so, in interviews the sisters constantly catch themselves, shifting between "he" and "she" and "George" and "Elizabeth."

Yet the emotion of the reunion was uncomplicated. "When we saw him it was like we just melted," Lisa said. "We just melted."

The only time Elizabeth cried, said sister Sharon, was on learning that her father had died. "She said she cried for the first time in years."

Next morning, Elizabeth had breakfast with her family at Bob Evans. She introduced them proudly to staff who called out "*There's Elizabeth!*" She walked them around town arm-in-arm, showing off her hangouts and people who knew her.

It was not all rosy. The sisters saw that they could not bring Elizabeth back to Arkansas just yet; that her needs were many; and they had preparations to make back home. Just as important, Elizabeth needed to be willing and ready to leave Charleston.

And there was another thing the family realized about Elizabeth and where she had landed after so many years of wandering.

"I think she found respite in Charleston. She found a place to call home. She found people that embraced her and cared. I think that's why she stayed as long as she did," said Lisa.

"I just want to tell Charleston how much our family appreciates that community for taking her on and maybe even tolerating her at times. There are good people in this World."

As the sisters and their mother drove south out of the city back to Arkansas, a brilliant sunset lit up the sky. Crying, they sang "Amazing Grace" and "I Can See Clearly Now" (one of their mother's favorite songs).

Lisa rolled back the sunroof and popped up out of the car to photograph the sunset. The photograph would later appear in a YouTube video the sisters made about finding their brother again. Leigh Ann held tight to her sister's legs as the car plunged homeward.

"I stand up and we're going 70 miles per hour!" said Lisa. "I can't tell you the healing that we felt driving home from Charleston. It's like I wasn't mad anymore!"

Bound for home

In early spring 2010 without a word to Covenant House, Elizabeth disappeared from Charleston.

She made her way south to Arkansas via Greyhound and hitchhiker's thumb (she was a road warrior, after all). She was in search of a school where her youngest sister taught in Cabot, Ark. She plopped down in the middle of the night outside the first school she found and went to sleep. Bearing no ID, she was promptly arrested by police.

Elizabeth was released from jail the next morning and Lisa arrived and took her to her house.

Lisa slipped back into the male pronoun to talk about her brother's return to the family fold at long last. "It was an amazing time. I was just ready to fight anybody that hurt him or made fun of him or bullied him."

Much could be said of the 3 years Elizabeth spent back home. She would sometimes ask her sisters to pull the car over to give a few dollars to some homeless person. She could be sweet and funny and -- much as the sisters loved George growing up -- "Elizabeth was so much sweeter and kinder and so compassionate and loving," said Lisa.

The happiness and joy was tempered by difficult times. There were rants and raves "and talking to people who were not there" as one sister put it. There were adjustments. Medication ordered. New family arrangements.

Their mother -- now in assisted living -- had the hardest time of all viewing her son as a daughter instead, the sisters say.

The sisters had their own final transitions to make.

Elizabeth eventually settled into Leigh Ann's home in Tulsa, a city she liked.

"Sometimes people would accidentally call her George and she would have no reaction," said Leigh Ann. "We would take long drives in Tulsa. I talked to her one day: 'I want George back. Can I have George back?'"

"I can't," Elizabeth told her. "I changed 20 years ago. This is who I am now. And I can't change."

So they put that question to rest, said Leigh Ann. "That made life so much easier for me and my entire family."

Telling the tale

The 3 sisters said they wished to be forthright in telling their family's tale for several reasons.

One, that homeless people have families and life stories too and yet are often ignored, dismissed, and even harassed.

Second, that a huge dose of patience and love is needed when transgender identity issues and mental illness tear at a family.

And third, said Sharon, they hope their family's tale might inspire other families.

"I just want people to know out there that if there's any dissension or disagreements in their family, maybe you can heal that. And reunite. And accept each other no matter what your differences are."

Last November, Elizabeth's family gathered around the Thanksgiving table. About that time, she began to grow sick and was put in the hospital. Doctors learned Elizabeth had a cancer mass on her left lung and blood clots all over her right lung.

Elizabeth was cared for her in an apartment by Grace Hospice, then was moved to Clarehouse hospice in Tulsa. Family gathered at her bedside in the middle of the night Feb. 7. As her breathing grew labored, Leigh Ann held Elizabeth in her arms and recited the 23rd Psalm, ending with:

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

"And she took her last breath," said Leigh Ann. "I just thank God that I got to be there and that she didn't die alone. She was holding my hand and she was looking in my eyes."

Reach Douglas Imbrogno at doug...@cnpapers.com or 304-348-3017.

Reader Comments

Timothy Koontz · · works at Law Offices of M. Timothy Koontz:

This is one of the best pieces of journalism I have ever read. I hope that it is appropriately forwarded to the state, regional, and national competitions when the award nomination period opens. Why can't we have more compelling human interest stories like this in the media? Kudos to Douglas Imbrogno and the *Gazette* for this top tier piece of journalism!

Tina Nelson

I agree!

Jacqueline Bevan

I agree!! What a wonderful article! More human interest stories are what we need these days with all the bad in the World. Very impressive! Definitely needs recognition!

Janet Hughes

Leslie Clay, you are an awesome beyond-words kind of a person. Bless you for what you have done. I cannot express in words my admiration for your kindness. I only wish more people acted in the manner which you have.

Traci Strickland · South Charleston High School

She was a Charlestonian. While this article has focused on more prominent Charleston residents, many citizens were kind to Elizabeth and spent hours with drinking coffee and offering companionship. She faced many injustices like the one at the bus station. A friend of mine witnessed a local bank disinfect the entire counter after Elizabeth completed her transaction. I learned Elizabeth's story after her death in February and was so torn between sadness and happiness. So sad for the loss of her soul from the Earth. But so happy that her family never gave up on finding her and welcomed her some with such open arms.

Sara Scott · Inbound Call Center Agent at TeleTech

Good read

Danny Walker · Sissonville High School

nice

Elsa Colston · Physical Therapist Assistant at Rehab One

This story is so sad. I really feel tearful. I remember seeing her in town, spoke to her once once and yes she was pleasant. Thank God she had a friend here!

Karin Tauscher Fuller

Excellent story! So beautifully and compassionately written. I had the pleasure of meeting Elizabeth a number of times and was always so intrigued. Such a kind and gentle person.

Valerie Cain Cuff

We never know about another's past, their journey, why they are as they are. I have been guilty of making assumptions when I knew nothing. I'm not sure I ever saw Elizabeth. But I do know that her story has taught me much about how important it is to just be kind and not assume. Because unless we are told the story of one's life, we never know what their journey has been. I am so thankful Elizabeth was reunited with her family, for her and for them.

Marilyn Hunt

This is very, very sad. Confronting reality is the answer to alienation of self. The alienation only leads into further loss and illusion. WWII experimenters were condemned for savage surgeries defacing humans. We are now mainstreaming abnormal behavior. Denial is the disease of our social structure and we are in BIG trouble. Another example of why looking for answers in the entertainment industry is not a good idea. The music industry is not there to save

you but to make money. As John Balushi said before his tragic death in 1982, "I know all about exploitation." Does the wWorld seem to be a cold, loveless place where betrayal and sorrow rule? You be the TRUST and you be the reliable and honest person you are looking for and help transform this desert of bare rock and waste. Especially do not encourage descent into despair in those younger and confused who are grieving. Stand up and fight!

Gina Marie Stanley · West Virginia University

I am very sorry. What is your point?

Mary Kessel Starr · Saint Simons Island, Georgia

I think she missed the point. Entirely.

Pattie Estep · Alum Creek, West Virginia

So loving this story. Everyone always wondered about the history behind her. Thank you.

Heidi Richardson Evans · Artist, Blogger at Daisybones :: Art+ Words by Heidi Richardson Evans

This is a beautiful piece, Doug. Tears are streaming down my face, remembering sharing lunches with Elizabeth at the bus stop and meeting her at my old thrift store. She had a powerfully sweet energy and it's really moving to learn about her history.

Gretchen Gossard Graves · Sinks Grove, West Virginia

I am so glad that her story is being told. Though difficult, she chose to live the life she needed rather than conform to society's skewed views of how she should be. May we honor her spirit.

Sandee Peery Beal · works at FC&A Publishing

I hope I will get the chance to read more of her story. Very touching ...

Sherry McLaughlin · K/1 Teacher at Greenbrier Episcopal

So glad you shared this. What a story! Got my good cry on this Sunday evening. XO

Amy Cobb McGinnis · Blogger at Eat Your Peace

Thank you Gretchen, Many Cheers!

Chuck Anzulewicz · West Virginia University

Finding out in this article that Elizabeth had died causes me a certain melancholy. I remember seeing her on the streets from time-to-time and I kinda assumed that she was a transgendered individual who had somehow been forced off the margin of Society. I knew there had to be a story there. Thanks very much to Doug Imbrogno for piecing it together.

Kelli Burns · works at Works at surfing karmic tidal waves

Fantastic job, Doug! I am honored to call Elizabeth my friend. During a particular horrible period in my life when I was living in the East End of Chas, Elizabeth befriended me. S/he was very kind and often had wacky and yet Zen Koan profound advice over the years. I would oft give Elizabeth my old lipstick or nail polish or sunglasses. And Elizabeth gave me -- well, how do I honestly say this -- the strength to go on. How would any of us have endured Elizabeth's karmic course as well, I ask you?

I think of Elizabeth as a kind of Holy Person. I'm definitely a fan. Could any of us go through this lifecourse and still be so often uplifting and sweet? Okay, Elizabeth could have some self-destructive streaks. But, heck, don't we all. Frankly, I miss and love her for what is is, was, can be again.

Bruce Severino · works at President, Living AIDS Memorial Garden, Inc.

Gosh, she appeared to affect many of us.

Staci Robinson · Chicago, Illinois

I do appreciate this piece. But the part where Imbrogno uses "s/he" makes me really really uncomfortable. If a person identifies as a specific gender -- and clearly this person did and used the name 'Elizabeth' -- you use the preferred pronoun, no matter how confusing it might be to you. "She" would have been sufficient. Anything else is very disrespectful to a transgender person.

I've been away from home for a long time now. But I would hope that this is not common practice for the *Gazette* and would encourage Imbrogno and other staff writers to take a look at GLAAD's guidelines for writing about transgender individuals.

Douglas Imbrogno

That was from a blogpost from 2006 and was intending no disrespect but just was indicating the unknown person/story encountered at the time, written in a free-form blog style. It is, of course, not common *Gazette* style. The entire series in fact is an attempt to paint an accurate portrait of Elizabeth's decision to identify as a woman come what may in her life.

Randi Robinson · Pharmacist at Fruth Pharmacy

Elizabeth was a customer of ours at Medicine Shop/Fruth. She wanted a sex change operation but Medicaid wouldn't pay for it without a doctor doing a board of review and I don't

think her Dr would do it. When her family found her, she took them in and introduced them to Sam and Carol.

Beverly Railey Robinson

Thank you for writing this story. I always wondered about Elizabeth.

Sharie Aiken Dale · Charleston, West Virginia

Saw her many times. Thank you for sharing Elizabeth's life. And God bless Leslie Clay for her kindness.

Mary Kessel Starr · · Saint Simons Island, Georgia

As a journalist myself, I cannot tell Douglas how envious I am that he was able to tell this remarkable story. This is the type of powerful storytelling most of us dream of having the opportunity to write. I picked up several things from the article including Elizabeth was shown compassion and real friendship in my hometown. Which makes me again proud to call Charleston home.

Gay and transgendered people encounter horrible prejudice despite their lot in life, talents, or where they came from. More people should pay as much attention in Sunday school as Leslie Clay did. Thank you for writing this powerful and moving story.

Briana Martin

A true testament of life. You will forever be missed. Keep smiling down on us Elizabeth. I got you babe! Love you....Bri

Billye Cooper · Make-Up Artist at Lancôme

This is the best article I have read in a long time. I live in Baltimore now. But growing up in Charleston, I remember seeing Elizabeth. I was initially afraid of her. But my mother who worked with individuals with mental illness told me not to be afraid of her.

Beverly Woodrum Johnson · works at HG Energy, LLC

Thank you so much for opening our eyes to Elizabeth. Many times we are quick to judge without getting the entire story. She met some pretty incredible people in Charleston who took her in and loved her.

Sarah J. Higgs · Saint Albans, West Virginia

Thank you for writing this story! Rest in Peace, Elizabeth.

Licia Pannell · CSSC at Frontier Communications

This article is amazing! I have seen her growing up and wondered what happened to her because I didn't see her anymore. Great she got to be with her family.

Jeremy Brannon · West Virginia State University

It's nice to now put a face with a name. I saw Elizabeth downtown a lot but had no idea of her past. I saw this online and judging by the description in the YouTube video I understand why she left her family 27 years ago. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VmRrG00d2s

Tina Nelson · Top Commenter

What an amazing read! I remember seeing Elizabeth many times. I am glad she got to reunite with her family after all of this time.

Pattie Estep · Alum Creek, West Virginia

Thank you so much for sharing this with us. I had wondered where she was and about her past. RIP fine lady.

Brad Masterson · · works at Semi-Retired

God bless you, Elizabeth.

Patrick Lawson · Worldwide Engineer II at World Wide Technical Services

Don't be so quick to judge others. They may be the *Angels* among us.

Linda Stanley · works at Alpha Natural Resources

I worked at the Burger King on Washington Street for many years until our stores closed for good in July 2003. Elizabeth was regular in my store. I am proud to have known her. Thanks for sharing this story!

Elsa Colston · Physical Therapist Assistant at Rehab One

No matter who you look at, somewhere there is someone who loves them, misses them.

Zoe Ellen Brain · · Ph.D. student / Assistant lecturer at Australian National University

{tears}

Sarah J. Higgs · · Saint Albans, West Virginia

Thank you to everyone involved with sharing this story. I know that Elizabeth was in Charleston by at least 2000 (if not earlier) as friends and I would see her walking along Corridor-G when we were in high school. We're not proud of the reactions we had to her at the time. It's not often that we are able to hear the stories behind the people we wonder about. But I think we've all learned now that everyone has a story, a history, and sometimes they might surprise you.

Jane Cook · CLEC Ordering Tech at Lumos Networks

please remember - it is NOT about YOU it is about THEM! Love and accept THEM. To hell with what your 'friends' will think. All the pain, suffering, and lost fear of the unknown and 'what will my community think' cost this family breaks my heart. Damn the fools around here too who mistreated her because she was different! What goes around comes around folks. That could have been your child. RIP Elizabeth. RIP.

Kristi Igo Cash · University of Charleston

so glad this family shared their story to open our eyes.

Mary Kessel Starr · · Saint Simons Island, Georgia

Such a powerful story.

Lisa Burdette Conley · works at WW Insurance Commission

Sure made me cry. This lady was a good woman and very polite. May she rest in peace. So glad she got to be with her family again.