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In 2009: Live the life you're meant to have

The Year of our Lord 2009 dawns on a shaky world. War, economic depression, job losses, business collapses, financial and political corruption, global warming, freak snowstorms. Sheesh! Bring on the plague of locusts already.

Some of us are anxious; some of us know it was ever thus. And some have no cares because they have “shuffled off this mortal coil,” in Shakespeare’s words, and are “sleeping the churchyard sleep,” in Emily Dickinson’s.

Lots of people died in 2008, in Zionsville and around the world. Some

names we know better than others, including actor Paul Newman; comedian George Carlin; dancer Cyd Charisse; folk singer Odetta; writer Studs Terkel; heart surgeon Michael DeBakey; the NFL’s Gene Upshaw; ABC sportscaster Jim McKay; fashion icon Yves Saint Laurent, and conservative author William F. Buckley, Jr.

But someone else important died this year, someone who stood out in a crowd, quite literally.

It was Indiana’s own Sandy Allen, the world’s tallest woman, who died at age 53 in Shelbyville on Aug. 13, 2008.

Sandy Elaine Allen weighed only 6 pounds, 5 ounces when she was born in Chicago on June 18, 1955, to a father she

never knew and a mother who left her for her grandmother to raise.

Born with a tumor on her pituitary gland that caused it to release growth hormone uncontrollably, Allen stood more than 6 feet by the time she was 10 years old. At a height of more than 7 feet when she began Shelbyville High School, her classmates rejected her. She stopped growing at 7 feet, 7 inches.



CYNTHIA STARKS

new view

According to a newspaper story on her death, “Sandy Allen spent her life overcoming the physical and social barriers that came with being the

world’s tallest woman,” which the Guinness Book of World Records named her in 1975.

In the same story, Allen says, “Let’s face it, I weigh more than 400 pounds. Shower heads hit me in the bellybutton. Just try washing dishes when the sink only comes up to your thigh. Try finding a pair of pantyhose that fit. A lot of women complain they don’t have a thing to wear. Those women should talk to me.

“We had a graduation party at a skating rink and I was the only kid who couldn’t participate. My feet were too big to rent skates. I just wanted to be like the other girls.” Allen wore a size 22 shoe.

“They called me a beanpole, a monster,

a freak. I try not to have anger. I’ve learned to pity mean people.” After high school graduation, she worked for a time at a state job where “her desk had to be lifted on cement blocks so her legs could fit under it.”

When she died, Allen was buried in a custom-made casket lowered into four adjacent cemetery plots.

“Life is short,” she often said, “I’m not.”

And she wasn’t — not of stature, nor courage or purpose. Her whole adult life was spent teaching young people to accept those who are different.

She talked to school kids every chance she got and made an inspirational video, all with the same message: human kindness, tolerance, understanding, empathy.

Sandy Allen was a remarkable woman. She didn’t choose to be a giant, nor the physical, emotional or social hardships that came with it. But her story illuminates one of life’s paradoxes: Sometimes our cross becomes our glory; our vulnerability becomes our strength. Her difference allowed her to teach some mighty lessons.

Sandy Allen may not have had the life she wished; she might have had something better than the life she was meant to have.

As 2009 dawns, we may be hard-pressed to do much about the global economic collapse, the war in Iraq, or the random tsunami. But it is my hope, as the year unfolds, that you and I begin to discover and to live — or to live more fully — the lives we were meant to have.