


A DAY IN THE LIFE OF

It was a fight we'll never forget, with an outcome we wish we could. Almost three decades on, Boxing News travels to the home of a fallen warrior to confront the realities of our sport





HOLDING ON:
Gerald, with sister Lisa
and the author, is
blind and nearly
deaf, so cherishes
physical contact

BY OLIVER FENNELL

GERALD MCCLELLAN

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HE legs that once carried one of the most intimidating and powerful boxers into and around the ring are now withered through misuse. The hands which once formed fists that punished opponents now reach out in search of comfort and connection, taking the place of eyes which once tracked prey but now no longer see anything. The body, once honed to athletic perfection, and which once travelled the world, is now confined for almost the whole day, every day, to an armchair. And the brain, once focused with the intensity of a hunter, which once crafted and executed world-class strategy, is now hopelessly broken, stuck in decades past, and largely unable to store new information.

He asks the same questions over and over again, and repeatedly announces the same information, with justifiable pride, that shows he at least still knows who he is and what he has accomplished.

"I'm Gerald Allen McClellan Senior! My position in boxing: middleweight champion of the world!"

Gerald 'G-Man' McClellan won the WBC 160lbs title in May 1993 with a fifth-round knockout of Julian Jackson. He was already regarded as one of the sport's biggest punchers. The Jackson win confirmed this reputation, and three title defences, all over within the first round, underlined it.

"Ask me what my record is."

"What's your record?"

"Twenty seconds!"

He punches the air, grinning widely. "Fastest knockout in history!"

One of those three defences was the 20-second finish he's referring to; a one-punch KO of Jay Bell in August 1993 which was at the time the quickest 'world' title bout ever recorded. It added to a growing legend that Gerald took with him up to super-middleweight and across to London when he challenged his 168lbs WBC counterpart, Nigel Benn, on February 25, 1995 – one of the most fateful nights in boxing history.

McClellan and Benn's fight was among the most violent the sport has ever seen. The only thing more awesome than the spectacle of Gerald's firepower was Benn's refusal to wilt under it. When Benn, a marked underdog, somehow clawed his way to victory, it should have been one of boxing's brightest nights; instead it was one of the darkest, and a darkness from which McClellan has yet to emerge, 29 years later.

★★★

"Steven?" he asks as I take his hand. His grip in return is strong and eager.

"No, I'm Oliver."

"Oliver? Full name?"

I tell him, and then I tell him again, louder, then again, louder still, as he continually asks me to repeat it, louder, louder, and pulls me closer to the side of his head, where a long, arcing scar traces the path where surgeons at the Royal London Hospital had cut open his skull to remove from his brain a massive blood clot that had formed and grown across those 10 tumultuous rounds with Benn.

"How old are you?" he asks.

"Forty six."

"Height?"

"Six-one."

"Weight?"

"One-ninety."

"You a boxer?"

"Not anymore."

"Why'd you stop?"

Photo: MINDY SMALL/GETTY IMAGES

"I was no good."

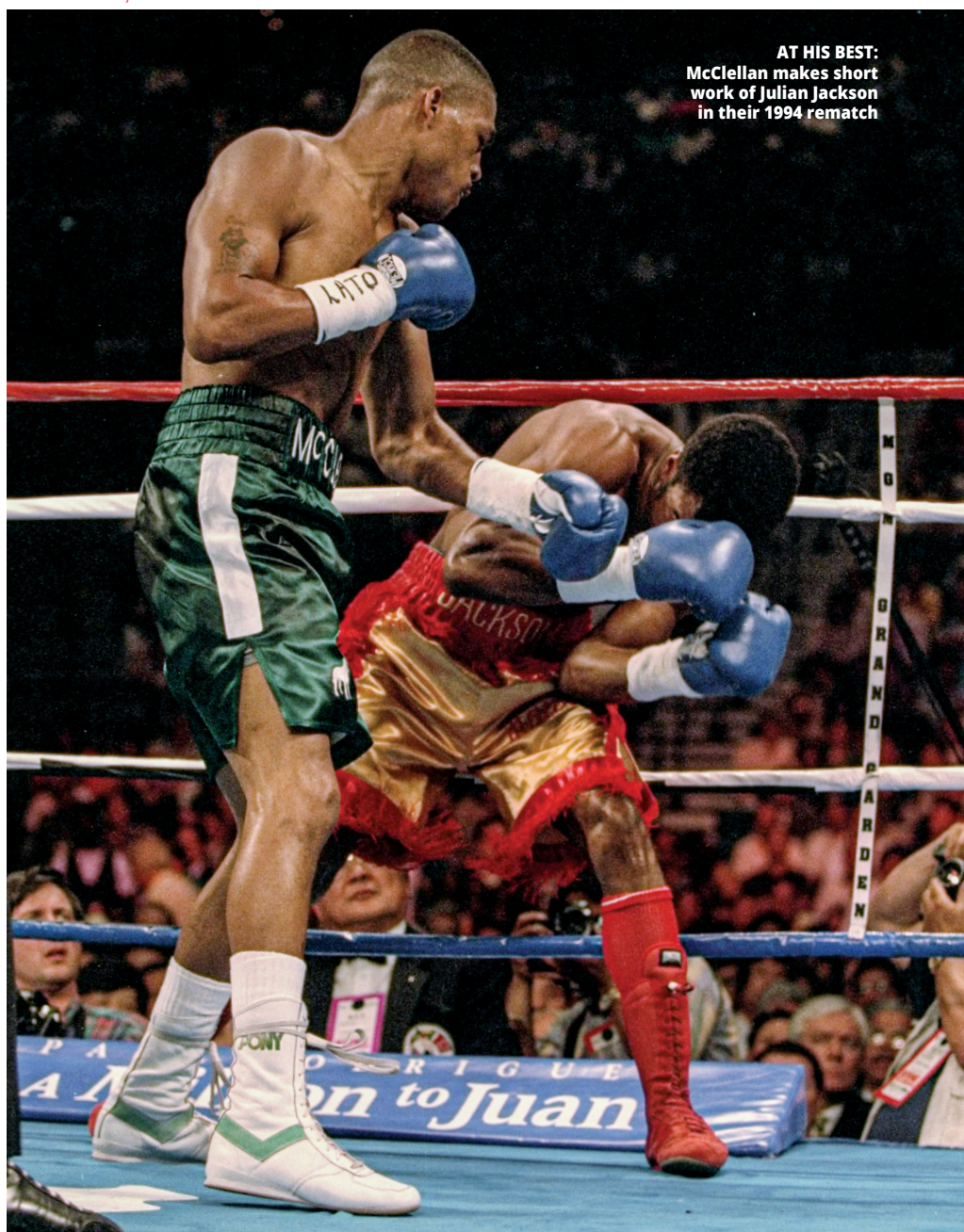
Gerald recoils at this, grimacing, and his voice takes on a high pitch that I will come to recognise as a sign he is upset.

"Lisa! Why'd you let him say he's no good?" he asks of his sister and full-time carer, with whom he shares this home in Freeport, Illinois. "Don't let him say that!"

Lisa tells me later that Gerald rarely feels sorry for himself – such is the nature of his injury that he doesn't really know he is injured – but hates to hear of others feeling down.

"If you cry about what happened to him, he'll hug you," she says.

And while my abiding impressions from spending a day with Gerald McClellan can hardly be called feelgood, it is still surprising that the emotions it stirs are, for the most part, not negative ones. There had been trepidation about meeting a badly brain-damaged person and not knowing how they would act, or how I should. I had expected to be distressed by seeing the condition he was in and the suffering he endured. And I



AT HIS BEST:
McClellan makes short
work of Julian Jackson
in their 1994 rematch



had dwelled on the personal torment of being confronted by the despicable toll exacted by a fight I had enjoyed watching, by the ghastly cost of an outcome I had cheered for, and by the neverending nature of a plight I had essentially ignored that night, when the image, televised into millions of homes, of Gerald being stretchered out of the ring was deliberately put to the back of my mind so I could continue drinking and celebrating with my friends.

There are, naturally, difficult moments during this day. Gerald's physical condition is decrepit; he can't stand or walk without support. There are outbursts, there is confusion, there is unintelligible rambling, and his short-term memory is minimal, meaning the same conversations can be had dozens of times. Even so, our interactions are rewarding. Gerald smiles and laughs easily. He is tactile, he wants to talk, he wants to know about me, he is pleased by the small gains of meeting a new person, and he appreciates the attention and recognition.

After a couple of hours, my name sticks. "Oliver," he begins, no longer mistaking me for Steven. "Favourite sport?"

"Boxing."

"Boxing! You know me?"

"Of course I know you; you're the champ."

"How you know me?"

"I saw you fight."

"Did I win?"

"You sure did. You beat John Mugabi in London."

"I knocked that motherfucker out!"

Another huge grin, another celebratory air-punch. And then a reset.

"Oliver. How old are you?"

"Forty six."

"Married?"

"Yeah."

"Kids?"

"Yeah, I've got one son."

"He spar?"

"No, he's just two years old."

Gerald laughs – "I thought he was grown!" – and then resets.

"Oliver. How old are you?"

"Forty six."

"Height?"

"Six-one."

"Weight?"

"One-ninety."

**DAY OF INFAMY:
Benn wins, but McClellan's
fight has only just begun**

"You a boxer?"

"Not anymore."

"Why'd you stop?"

I decide on a different

answer: "I became a boxing writer."

"You're a boxing writer?"

"Yeah."

"You're gonna write about me?"

"Yes, G-Man."

"I'm Gerald Allen McClellan Senior! Ask me what I do for a living."

"What do you do for living?"

"I use these!" He holds up his fists and laughs – and then resets again.

"Oliver. How old are you?"

★★★

Variations of this conversation go round and round. He also tells me many times his idol is Tommy Hearns and asks if 'Hitman' is still fighting. When told he isn't, Gerald asks why, and when told it's because his idol is too old, he is taken by surprise. He refuses to believe that Hearns is 65, that Sugar Ray Leonard is 67, that Don King is 92, that his own father is 84, or that his sister Lisa is 55, even though she tells him this herself.

"He thinks he's still 27," says Lisa, which was his age when he fought Benn, and when time stopped. Mercifully, he remembers nothing of the Benn fight.

What was he like before his injury?

"Honestly? He was an asshole," says Lisa.

"Well, he was very good to people in that he was very generous with money. But I mean he was very, very serious. We didn't really get along. Out of all the siblings [two boys and three girls], he and I were the least close."

So, why did Lisa inherit the duty of caring for Gerald?

"I ask myself that every damn day," she sighs. "I was in college training to be a nurse. I was going to take a job in Florida, but I came home to take care of Gerald."

"He had a girlfriend at the time and they had a child that was six months old when

he got hurt, but she was soon gone. Initially, us three sisters shared the duty, but Sandra developed health issues of her own and Stacey stepped away for personal reasons."

On top of that, their mother died in an accident in 1999, and their father had moved to Mississippi years earlier. Lisa refused to send Gerald to a nursing home, so chose to care for him on her own, in the house he had bought after winning the championship.

And what a marvellous job she does of that. If they were the "least close" siblings before, their love for one another is obvious now; a bond forged over 29 years in which almost every hour has been spent together, with any number of hopes and disappointments, episodes of medical and emotional turbulence, and the necessary intimacies of helping a person who relies on another for their every need: Lisa cooks for Gerald, bathes him, dresses him, helps him use the toilet, physically supports a man who now weighs more than 200lbs when he needs to move and walk, and gives him his medicine.

Recently, this medicine regimen has been added to, with a side-effect being the return of a desire for a kind of intimacy that not even Lisa can provide.

Gerald's medicine cabinet is as full as you'd imagine. There are steroids, proteins, peptides, soporifics, vitamins and supplements. He has also had stem cell therapy and is currently on the Millennium Brain Rescue protocol, a hormone course aimed at improving deficits in attention, memory and emotion characteristic of traumatic brain injuries. This includes daily injections of testosterone, which are aimed at boosting executive brain function but have also caused the resurrection of something long dormant: Gerald's sex drive.

"Oh, boy," says Lisa, rolling her eyes. "The beast has woken up. Sometimes it's all he talks about: 'Man, I need to make love! I haven't made love in years!'"

There's no outlet for that, and Lisa dismisses the obvious one. "Our dad said we can take him to someone who can help him out. I said, 'a prostitute? Not on my

watch!' First of all, she might take advantage of him. Second, he might do something she's not expecting. Gerald can sometimes get aggressive. And if she's dirty and they don't use protection, do I need him catching something on top of all his other problems? So, I told Dad no, and he said 'you can't tell me what I can and can't do for my son'. I told him next time he comes to visit, he can check straight in to the hotel, because he's not staying here. We haven't spoken since."

There have been other, less problematic, gains, too. Lisa says under the Millennium programme, Gerald's emotional state is more stable. He has fewer mood swings, he manages frustration better, can concentrate for longer, and his short-term memory is improving. "See? He already remembers you. Before, it took days of repeated contact for

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THE DIARY

Lisa breaks down a typical day in the McClellan household

MORNING

"I let Gerald sleep until he wakes up on his own, unless he has an appointment. This will be 8-9am if he's had a good night; if the melatonin has worked and he's slept an entire night. Without it, his brain won't shut off and he can be awake for days.

"The first thing he does is he has a cup of coffee while I run his bath. He can sit in the bath unaided and he can brush his teeth on his own. After his bath, I make his breakfast. He used to be happy with Fruity Pebbles; that was his breakfast for 26 years. Now, he wants a hot breakfast every day, usually three breakfast muffins and some hash browns, with juice.

"He spends most of his time in his chair in the living room. After breakfast, I sit down with him for an hour every day and just have a conversation. I ask him how he's doing and usually he'll say, 'I'm doing great'. We talk about various subjects; a lot of the time they're subjects he chooses."

AFTERNOON

"Next is a bathroom break. I help him to the bathroom before every meal. Lunch is at about 1-2pm. He'll have a sandwich or a meal with meat, vegetables, potato, rice. He has plenty of snacks in between. We keep a lot of junk food in the house!

"He usually takes a nap after lunch if it's quiet. If I have to go anywhere, run some errands, his niece Mary will stay with him, but if I have to travel somewhere overnight, Gerald usually has to come with me.

"He might have visitors in the afternoon. His grandson comes three or four times a week, and there are other visitors once or twice a week, such as our brother and our sisters. My boyfriend Frank cuts his hair and shaves him. He spends a lot of time with Gerald; they have a really close bond."

EVENING

"Dinner is his biggest meal, although they're all big! He likes steaks, mac and cheese, turkey, ham, ribs, meatloaf, spaghetti and vegetables. I grow vegetables in our garden. There's nothing better than having fresh organic food from your own garden.

"After dinner, he goes to the bathroom, gets cleaned up, gets his pyjamas on and gets ready for bed. I give him his meds and he's usually in bed around 9.30-10pm. If he falls asleep in his chair, I stay on the sofa, otherwise he has his own bedroom downstairs and I go upstairs, with a monitor.

"If he sleeps well, he'll wake up for 5-10 minutes a few times but fall back to sleep. Some nights it's hard to turn his brain off and he talks a lot, because his thoughts are verbal; he says whatever he's thinking. I don't sleep a lot!"



**PERMANENT REMINDER:
Gerald's scar shows the sheer
extent of his brain injury**

him to remember someone new," she says. And I also see for myself evidence of another cause for optimism – maybe, just maybe, he is beginning to regain some level of eyesight.

I return to Gerald while Lisa starts to cook dinner. To tide him over, she gives him a bag of M&Ms. As we go back over the same conversations, Gerald starts eating the M&Ms and then offers me the bag. I shake out a modest amount and he suddenly shouts: "Lisa! He only took three!"

Lisa comes back to the living room. "How many did you take?" she asks. I show her my open palm with three M&Ms in it.

"You hurt my feelings," says Gerald. I apologise, and he tells me it's OK, hugs me and passes me the bag again. I take a more substantial amount and hand back the bag. "Keep it," he says, so I do.

Later, Lisa marvels at this little moment. "How did he know you only took three? All tests show he's still completely blind. He's pretty sharp in other ways, like he can work out where you are based on sounds, or if I'm smoking a cigarette he can smell it and know where I am. But how could he know exactly how many M&Ms you took?

"There was another time, he hit me in the head with a shoe. He threw it from his chair

while I was napping on the sofa and it hit me right in the head. I was asleep at the time, so I wasn't smoking or

making any sound. I woke up and thought we were being burgled, because who else would be hitting me in the head? But it wasn't an accident, because then Gerald started laughing and he said, "I got that bitch!"

★★★

**“
WITHOUT HIS
MEDS, HIS BRAIN
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AWAKE FOR DAYS”**

Dinner is served – ours at the dining table, Gerald's on a tray on his lap. He steadily works his way through a huge serving of turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, beans, macaroni and cornbread. I'm told his favourite meal is two McDonald's Quarter Pounders, and his preferred breakfast is three sausage and egg muffins. There's clearly

nothing wrong with his appetite, which explains why he is now a heavyweight, and his upper body remains muscular, even though he does no exercise.

"I do two push-ups a day," he'd told me earlier, but Lisa said he can't manage even that.

When Gerald is left alone in his armchair, he listens to the TV, sometimes mimicking the actions indicated by the sounds of a movie, sometimes singing along to music

videos. Usually, he entertains himself with a constant stream of dialogue, mostly a babble to me, though Lisa has an ear for it and knows when to react or respond, and when to leave him be. Often, he calls out the same names – those of his siblings, “Lisa!”, “Stacey!”, “Todd!”, “San!”, or those of his old gym mates, “Tommy!”, “Mike!”, “Kenny!”, respectively referring to ‘Hitman’ Hearn and Michael Moorer, who he trained with under Emanuel Steward at the Kronk, and Kenny Gould, a local welterweight contender of the early ‘90s and good friend of Gerald.

All three stay in touch with Gerald, and Hearn calls him most days, according to Lisa, who adds: “If I’ve pissed Gerald off, he’ll be on the phone telling Kenny and Mike to come and kick my ass!”

At other times, the names he shouts are seemingly at random; incongruous outbursts while he talks about something else entirely. “James Bond!”, “Rumpelstiltskin!”, “Michael Jackson!”, “Bushwick Bill!”

Michael Jackson had come up in conversation earlier, when a song of his had played on the TV and Gerald asked if he’d made any new songs recently. Lisa, not for the first time, had to break the news that Jackson had passed away.

“No! He passed? What the hell? What happened?” Gerald asked, in that high pitch of distress.

“He overdosed.”

“Oh man! Why? Why? What the hell?” Gerald’s face contorted in anguish at the news, from 2009, that his favourite singer had died.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE:
Lisa McClellan has cared for
her brother for 29 years

“It was an accident.”

Gerald wiped tears from his eyes and then started singing the chorus from *P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)*. When he was finished, he asked Lisa if Jackson had made any new music recently.

“No, Gerald, he passed away.”

“No! No! What happened?”

★★★

When it’s time to go, I sit next to Gerald, grab his hand one last time and start to say my goodbyes.

“Oliver? You’re leaving?”

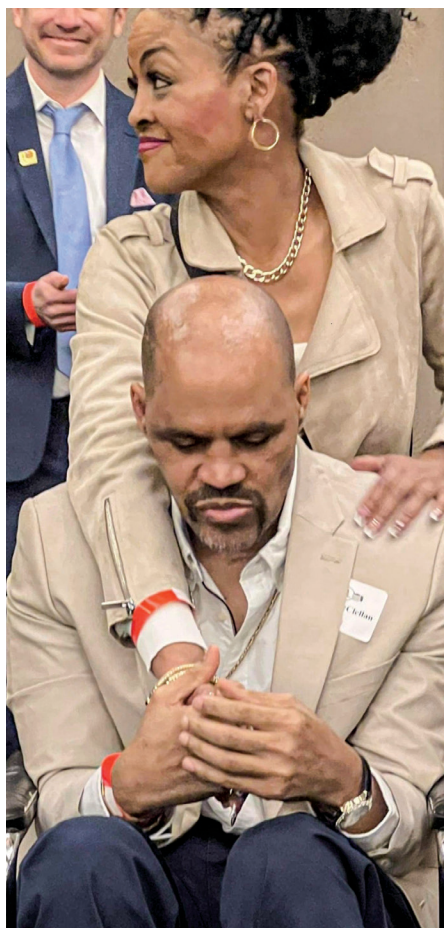
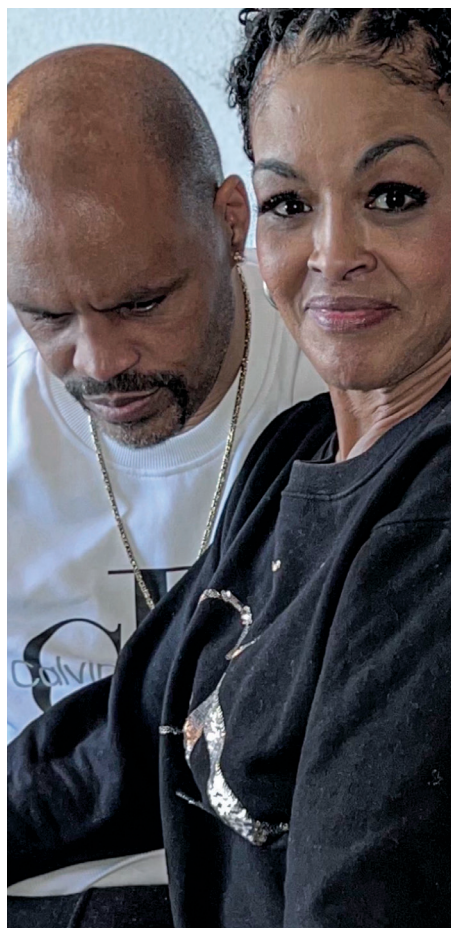
“Yes, G-Man. It was a pleasure meeting you.”

“Come here.” He pulls me close, chest to chest, pushes the side of his head against mine, not to hear me better but in a show of affection, and hugs me tightly. “I love you, man.”

“I love you too, champ.”

My voice wobbles just a little as I’m taken aback by these actions and these words; by how much our simple exchanges have been valued by Gerald – and by me. I blink away a tear, hoping he won’t notice, because as Lisa had told me, and as I have seen, he is more upset by other people’s problems than his own.

Gerald McClellan, once one of the most ferocious, aggressive and intimidating fighting men the world has known, has been reduced to this basic level of human existence. And I’ve never met anyone quite so human. **BN**



WONDER WOMAN

An award winner's benevolence reaches far beyond her own family

THE Boxing Writers Association of America have honoured Lisa McClellan with their 2023 John McCain-Bill Crawford Courage Award.

This recognises not only a selfless life dedicated to almost single-handedly caring for her brother, but also her dedication to helping other boxers who’ve fallen on hard times.

She provides moral and practical support where she can, advocates for keeping retired boxers in the public eye, and for the past nine years has assisted eligible fighters in applying for the Jose Sulaiman Boxers’ Fund, a WBC initiative which awards up to \$10,000 per year to those who are struggling.

Most recently, she arranged for the bedbound Wilfred Benitez and his sister/carer Yvonne to move out of their second-floor Chicago apartment and into a spacious detached house in her hometown of Freeport, where she introduced them to her social and support network. Ahead of the move, she also secured a wheelchair-accessible van for them, thanks to funding from WBC President Mauricio Sulaiman.

If there’s a notable boxer in the United States who’s suffering with injuries, illness, depression, addictions, homelessness or financial problems, chances are Lisa has been in touch, and more than likely found a way to help. Her contacts book is thick with major names in the worlds of boxing, medicine and the media, and she has earned an enormous amount of goodwill in all of them.

In 2022 she turned this crusade into an official entity, co-founding the Ring of Brotherhood (ROB), a collective of doctors, sports figures and media professionals seeking to help stricken athletes and their families, and to raise awareness of the dangers of competing in sports – not just boxing – which carry an inherent risk of head trauma.

Lisa appears tireless. Caring for Gerald is not so much a full-time job as a round-the-clock one, yet somehow she seems to find more than 24 hours in her days. When not looking after her brother, she is taking phone calls, joining video conferences, sending emails and endlessly researching. And for all this, she asks for nothing for herself, only appeals for action and awareness to further ROB’s goals.

This, of course, costs money, and so any donations to ROB, a registered charity in partnership with the WBC, are most welcome. To make one, and for more information, visit www.ringofbrotherhoodfoundation.org/donate

Alternatively, should you wish to contribute to Gerald’s medical bills, a significant and never-ending expense, you can do so at www.gofundme.com/f/28y3tim32o