

Gary Ellis Obituary

By Bob Rich Jr.

Captain Gary Ellis passed away peacefully on Ash Wednesday, Feb 26, 2020 in Weston, Florida after a brief illness. Gary, a modern day fishing legend throughout the Florida Keys and around the world, will best be remembered as a cofounder, with his wife Susan, of the Redbone Celebrity Catch and Release Charity Fishing Series.

Born in Sioux City IA, after serving in the US Army abroad, Gary moved to Chicago, IL where he became a member of the Screen Actors Guild. While he won many acting parts, perhaps his most famous role was that of the Camel Filters cowboy in that company's national media campaign. His rich baritone voice was also in great demand for numerous commercials while he worked as a manager of several nightclubs on Chicago's famous Rush Street.

In the sixties, Gary headed south and found home in Islamorada in the Florida Keys. Migrating to 'The Sport Fishing Capital of the World', it was natural that the young man would begin his future career on the 'high seas' working first as a mate on an off-shore charter fishing boat for the legendary Captain Skip Bradeen.

A protege of Captain Jim Brewer, Gary found his true calling guiding in the mystical shallow backcountry waters of the Florida Bay. It was then that he met and fell in love with a beautiful local girl named Susan Sheppard. The two were married and soon blessed with an enchanting blonde baby daughter, Nicole. The young couple's world was soon rocked by the news that their beautiful baby girl had a little known genetic disease, cystic fibrosis, that rendered afflicted children's average life expectancy to around 10 years with no known cure.

The young couple went into shock, then came out swinging with a plan to prolong young lives including their daughter's by raising awareness and money to find a cure for this dreaded disease. Together, Gary and Susan founded a celebrity fishing tournament where anglers and celebrities would fish as teams to catch and release two of the Key's most praised target species, redfish and bonefish. Thus the name Redbone Tournament.

Aided by the largesse of the ever-caring Florida Key's community, outstanding fishing guides and the help of early celebrities like the dean of sports announcers Curt Gowdy, singing star Phil Harris and legendary Hall of Fame baseball star Ted Williams, the inaugural event launched from Islamorada's iconic Lorelei Restaurant and Cabana Bar in the fall of 1988.

From its humble origins and teaming up with The Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, that early tournament delighted anglers around the world and grew to almost forty similar events in fishing venues worldwide. That 'impossible dream' of a young fishing guide and his bride to save the life of their daughter has flourished over 31 years and raised over \$30 million to find a cure.

And that's not all, this year the CF scientists announced the successful development of a therapy that will save countless lives and turn cystic fibrosis from a deadly disease into a manageable condition, allowing afflicted children to live and grow old.

Oh, and that beautiful blonde baby girl that inspired the dream? Nicole is now 35 years old, married to a handsome young man from up north, Joe Gavigan, and working as a Senior Global Marketing Communications Manager, for a multi-national food company, Rich Products, which was proud to be one of the early participants and sponsors of Susan and Gary Ellis' Redbone Series.

While his friends teased him about his fast pace and catlike nine lives, Gary Ellis dreamed of a world where his daughter would outlive him. Now as he enters into his next adventure, his life's dream has come true..... Well done dear friend. Rest in peace!

His family is planning a special celebration of his life and legacy in Islamorada next month on a date to be announced. Then, as is custom in the Florida Keys and at his request, a flotilla of boats will leave the docks of Lorelei, where the Redbone began, for their trip to the backcountry where Gary Ellis' ashes will be spread in the warm waters of his beloved Florida Bay.

In lieu of flowers, the two special women in Gary's life, Susan and Nicole, have requested that contributions be made to the Redbone, furthering Gary's mission to fund CF research toward a cure for all fighting cystic fibrosis.