

'THE DAY DONNY HERBERT WOKE UP'

Local author recounts firefighter's story

by **KEN BARTOLOTTA**
Reporter

For Richard Blake, formerly of West Seneca, there was no penetrating moment when he decided to write a book about Buffalo firefighter Donald Herbert.

Instead, it was a gradual process that led Blake to begin the account of the Buffalo firefighter who suffered a severe brain injury while fighting a fire in December 1995 and emerged from a comatose-like state almost a decade later at Father Baker Manor in Orchard Park.

"The Day Donny Herbert Woke Up," released in late 2007, tells a story that some consider a miracle.

It made national headlines at the time, but as it began to fade from the public's memory, Blake began thinking more and more about Herbert, whose widow, Linda, is the author's first cousin.

"When Don's story started to die down and his condition started to regress, it began to hit me how sad this was," said Blake, now a resident of New York City. "They thought they had him back, but he was getting worse. It was terrible."

The motivation to pursue the book began to take shape after Blake's aunt offered the writer some perception on Herbert's story.

"My aunt had said to me that if it turned out that we had him back for just one day that we should all be eternally grateful for that one day," he said. "It got me thinking much differently about the whole situation."

Later, at a book signing, Blake had a long conversation with Linda Herbert, who asked what his next book would be about.

"She had asked me, and it just sort of came out," he said. "I mentioned that I should do a book about Donny."

What came from that conversation is a book that's not just about Herbert's injury and the day he returned to consciousness, but the firefighter's life as a man, a husband, a father and, in Blake's opinion, a South Buffalo legend.

"My impression of him was always what a great guy he was," said Blake. "The sort of guy you wish you could be more like but in your heart knew he really was one of a kind."



Former West Seneca resident **Richard Blake's** book 'The Day Donny Herbert Woke Up' was recently released.

During his interviews with the Herbert family, Blake found that their responses varied.

"Linda was great about it. She really had no problem talking about anything, and at times you could tell she was re-living some things," he said.

"When it came to his sons, the youngest, Nicholas, opened up, but the other brothers were more stoic, but mostly it was fine. They're all great kids," said Blake.

In talking with Linda, Blake found that Herbert's widow viewed that brief time when her husband returned as a sort of last goodbye to his family.

"I think she felt that Donny's deep devotion and love for them came through in the end," he said. "That Donny used his incredible determination to will himself back, if only momentarily."

"He checked in on them, found that the boys were OK and all grown up," he said. "And that gave him the peace of mind to let go."

In writing the book, Blake once again found himself in familiar territory. His first book was titled "Talking Proud: Rediscovering the Magical Season of the 1980 Buffalo Bills."

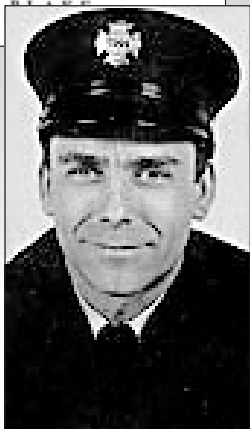
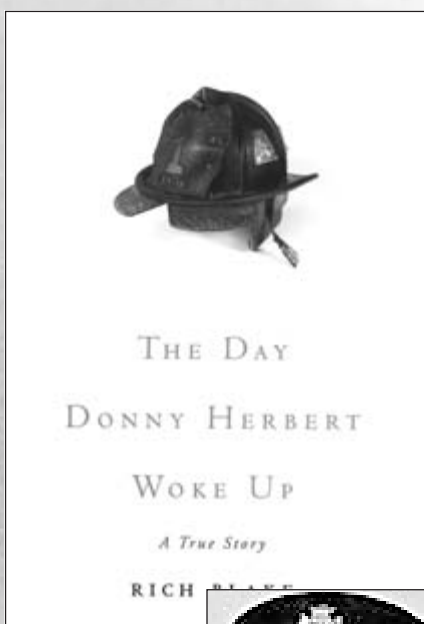
"I don't set out to write books about Buffalo, but in that case I think I wanted to give the city a good name," he said. "But revisiting this area and writing about it is something I do enjoy — the people the city. It's a great place."

Blake was careful in delving into the medical aspects of Herbert's story.

"I try not to be too heavy-handed with the science and medical terminology," he said. "You have to write about it in a way that people will understand, without being inaccurate."

While looking back on compiling the book, through the interviews and the research, one word comes to Blake's mind: family.

"That day when Donny woke up, I think about his family coming together to surround him and give him a big hug and just reconnect," he said. "I thought about those moments in life when family overrides everything else. It's the ties that bind, and we can't get away from that."



Herbert