

CHARLIE AND ANNETTE BARKER

Charlie Barker, a native of New Orleans, was in his early professional life a manufacturing engineer, working with companies like Brown & Root and Litton Resources Systems in the design and building of oil related equipment ranging from down-hole tools for drilling rigs to pipe-laying barges for pipelines. He eventually moved on into high-tech with Research and Development for the Input/Output Company. He was a member of MENSA, the oldest and largest High-IQ society in the world, open to people who score at the 98th percentile or higher on a standardized, supervised IQ test.

After bypass heart surgery in 1999, however, he and his wife Annette took the step many people dream of (but few actually do) to leave the rat race and take time to smell the roses while they could. They sold their home, downsized to the point where everything they owned would fit into one small storage unit and their newly bought RV, and hit the road. For the next several years they crisscrossed the U.S. and Canada. When they found a place they particularly liked they would find work there and settle in for a few months. They loved the freedom to come and go at will, enjoying the people and the beauty around them. If things ever got boring they could pull up stakes on short notice and answer once again the call of the road.

It was during this period that Charlie let his gray hair and beard grow until little children's faces lit up as their lips formed the magic cry of recognition: Santa Claus! Never one to miss an opportunity, he invested in a Santa Claus suit and took on the role every Christmas in whatever place they happened to be. It became a new career, and a portable one, which fitted their lifestyle perfectly. He joined IORBS (International Order of Real-Bearded Santas.) Eventually Annette, always an avid seamstress and crafter, made herself a Mrs. Santa costume, and they appeared as Mr. and Mrs. Santa at the Houston Galleria for Christmas, 2007. They were a huge success and the Galleria management was quick to get them under contract for the next Christmas, but in April 2008 Charlie was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. When his doctors warned him against exposure to young children because of the danger of serious infection, once again the Barkers adapted to new life circumstances and changed course.

In order to be near Charlie's treatment center at M. D. Anderson and to ensure Annette's comfort and safety, in April 2009 the couple sold the RV and moved into a third floor apartment in Building E of Treemont. Since then they have become active participants in the Troubadours and computer coaching (Charlie) and sewing, crafts and quilting (Annette) and even as King and Queen of our Treemont Mardi Gras 2010. Despite their own health concerns they are quick to help others wherever possible and have had a major part in gathering information, organizing, printing and updating the Residents' Directory.

Charlie's once luxuriant hair and beard are now almost totally white, trimmed and tamed by many rounds of chemotherapy, and the rosy Santa cheeks are not as rosy as they once were. But the twinkle is still in the eyes, and his good humor and love for others shine through all the ravages of illness. Annette, always the faithful helpmate, cares for him abetted by Houston Hospice, and they are both sustained and upheld by their devout Christian faith. Their devoted family are daughter Marcelle, husband Tom and beloved granddaughter Ryan, age 9. and son Scott and wife Gloria, all living in the Houston area. An adopted son Steve lives in New York.

In Charlie's college days he held a part-time job manning the shortwave radio at Loyola University in New Orleans. On duty one night he received a MayDay call from British Honduras, a small Central America country on the underside of the Yucatan. A hurricane of tremendous force had all but leveled the country, leaving thousands dead or injured and homeless. In those days before instant communication, a priest had made it to a radio and was crying out for water, food, and medical help for the area. Charlie became a first responder, notifying the Red Cross and other rescue agencies. This experience became the basis for the satisfying hobby of ham radio operating and provided many opportunities to do what he does best—help his fellow man. The Barkers have earned the respect, admiration and affection of all who know them.

