

Ronald Joseph Prue died in a nursing home in Council Bluffs, Iowa, on Feb. 5. I'd like to tell you about him so you can come to know him as more than just a patient.

Ronald was many things, an alcoholic, a panhandler, homeless at times, a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, a father of three, a brother and a son. He was also a hero who, years ago, rushed without hesitation into a burning house to save an infant. And he was one of the most generous people you would ever meet. In January, he asked me to pay the rent on his small studio apartment with money from his second to last social security check, so his friend would have a place to stay for at least one more month because he knew he would not be coming back.

Those closest to him called him Sonny, I called him dad.

In 1992 while serving a prison sentence my father sent me some papers and asked if I would be his financial and medical power of attorney. Little did I know what signing those papers would really mean. I still carry those papers with me today.

To understand the medical decisions I made with my father and, at times, on his behalf, you should understand his background. As a young boy, my father, like many Indian children, was sent to St. Francis, a Jesuit run boarding school, on the Rosebud Reservation. Sadly, he was not treated well there by the people who ran the school. He was not allowed to speak the language his beloved grandmother Nancy Little Money was teaching him during the summer months when he lived with her, he was beaten when he ran away and was caught, and locked in his dorm room.

The first time my father received care at UNMC, he was treated for tuberculosis, which left a silver dollar size hole in his left lung. His physicians at the time wanted to remove the infected lobe but he refused, giving no explanation. Frustrated one doctor told him in no uncertain terms "then you will die" and left the room. I could understand their frustration and sympathize, they only wanted to help. But what they did not understand was the strong cultural belief among my people that Grandma Nancy had taught my father – that is if you mutilate your body your spirit will not pass on when you die.

Last year I knew my father was dying. My number one priority was his spiritual health, his physical health was secondary by now. I knew I had to prepare myself and him for his spirit journey. We believe that how you live is important, but equally important is how you approach death. My father was not approaching his death in a good way. He had what I refer to as "soul sickness." While he was not going to change, I wanted him to know that even if he was trapped in a bottle he was never alone.

In October, I brought my father to UNMC because he hadn't urinated in almost a week. The ER nurse drained nearly two liters of urine from his bladder. A series of ultrasounds revealed something strange around his liver. He was admitted and spent a few days in isolation because of his history of TB. My father was always compliant with whatever the doctors and nurses asked of him. He spoke very little and never revealed his cultural concerns. Over the years I learned to become a voice for him in this area. As medical POA with limited ability it was up to me to be his advocate, but always in partnership with his decisions, even if those decisions were not what I would want or choose. I remember telling several doctors at various times: my father knows what he is doing, he knows what he is doing is wrong; he knows it can kill him and yet he continues to do it. It was harsh but reality.

My father always felt locked up when he was in the hospital. And I could see why. I could see an angry young child locked up in a dormitory. And when he complied, I could see that child who complied with whatever those in authority were asking of him because it would mean freedom from confinement.

One morning I came to check on him and found out that he was being scheduled for a liver biopsy that same afternoon. I asked the nurse to please tell the doctors to wait, knowing that this could not take place without the proper spiritual preparation. They complied and his nurse Jessica was especially helpful in getting the smoke detector in his room turned off for the ceremony that evening. I called in a friend, who is a sun dancer named Rose. She came that evening. She talked quietly and respectfully to my father. She sang. We prayed. And she smudged him with sage and sweet grass. The liver biopsy the next day revealed cancer. I asked for that piece of him back so I could bury it with him, but was told I could not have it because the sample taken was so small and they needed to keep it for accreditation purposes.

The next challenge came when my father was about to be released from the hospital. Dr. Feloney discussed sending him out of the hospital with a Foley catheter. I was extremely worried, knowing the tenuous living situation he was going back to. He was being kicked out of the room he lived in at a motel in Council Bluffs. But I acquiesced, and the day before Halloween he was released. I was not called when he left the hospital and he caught a ride with a friend. I didn't know where he was for the next two weeks. During that time he called me once from a bar to inquire about how to get the catheter out and I told him to go to the ER. Fortunately, Dr. Feloney was able to give me the medication he needed to help him urinate and once I did reconnect with my father, I gave him the samples.

Throughout this time I attended Inipi or sweat lodge ceremonies to pray for him, I also prayed for him at the church I attend. I begged our creator to take pity on his soul, to watch over him, to accept him for who he was and to draw him close. On Friday, Feb. 4 I went to Inipi. Sitting there next to my mentor and friend, Wendell, I quietly prayed and told God that I was ready to let my father go. That I trusted he would take care of him until I could do so myself once again. Nine hours later the nurse called to tell me my dad had begun his spirit journey.