

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Thank You, Stranger: At her darkest moment, a nurse was lifted up by an unexpected ticket attendant 01GVNTTGNMEPH5PZMQ75KDJBNI**

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**TIM NELSON:** Has someone ever taken you by surprise with an act of kindness when you're at your lowest? Sometimes, it's the small things that can make you feel a whole lot better. Our series "Thank You, Stranger" looks at those special people whose small acts of kindness have a big impact. MPR producer Ellen Finn spoke with a nurse who was comforted by a stranger during a dark period in her life.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Dixie Vavrichek was living in Dodge City with her husband and kids, working as a nurse at the Mayo Clinic in Kasson. It was a busy clinic day just before Christmas when Dixie was stopped in her tracks with a strange feeling.

**DIXIE** And something inside me said I had to go to Arizona.

**VAVRICHEK:**

**ELLEN FINN:** That's where Dixie's parents spend their winters.

**DIXIE** I told my supervisor, I have to leave. I went home, started packing, and my husband came in from chores. I said,

**VAVRICHEK:** Ron, I don't know what's going on inside of me, but I have to go see Mom and Dad. He said, yes, go.

I had three children. I have never been away from my family at Christmas. And we'd been married over 40 years at that time. So it was difficult. So I flew out the next day.

**ELLEN FINN:** When she arrived at her parents' house, her mom was there but not her dad. When Dixie asked where he was, her mom told her he had gone to the hospital.

**DIXIE** We went to see him, and he was miserable. He was sitting in a chair. All he had on was a gown-- no pictures on

**VAVRICHEK:** the wall, not a clock, nothing.

He was unshaven. He was dirty. His toenails were grown out, his fingernails grown out. And I said, Dad, what's going on? And he started to cry. He said, I don't know.

**ELLEN FINN:** Dixie and her mom didn't like what they saw. They decided her dad needed to come home for Christmas. That evening was Christmas Eve, and Dixie feared it would be his last.

**DIXIE** So I had to get an ambulance to take him back to their home. So it was just Dad, Mom, and I. They had a flimsy

**VAVRICHEK:** tree. Tradition at our house was oyster stew on Christmas Eve. And Mom opened a little can of oysters, put them in a bowl and a dollop of margarine.

My dad loved butter, and he's been on a strict diet. Mom left the room. And as soon as she walked out, Dad said, "Get the butter."

I got the butter. And I swear he put a quarter of a pound of butter on his soup. He ate it all, and he winked at me. And I winked back.

**ELLEN FINN:** Despite Dixie and her dad's shared fun, things still felt very wrong.

**DIXIE** Dad went to bed, and I had to sleep on the couch. It was cold. I hardly knew where I was, due to grief, loneliness.

**VAVRICHEK:**

**ELLEN FINN:** Dixie missed her family back in Minnesota terribly.

**DIXIE** I had never felt so alone. Next morning, I got up early and went in the bedroom. And Dad was waking up, and he  
**VAVRICHEK:** looked at me, and he said, "Daughter, you need to go home." I said, "Thank you, Dad."

I bent down, and he kissed me. He was not like that, but he did.

**ELLEN FINN:** Dixie took a cab to the airport, and that's where the stranger enters the picture.

**DIXIE** I really didn't have a ticket. So I got in line. And when I got up to the ticket counter, there was a man there who  
**VAVRICHEK:** said, "What can I do for you?"

I said, "I really need to go home." And he looked at me funny. "You realize this flight is full, don't you?" And I broke down.

I said, "I think I just saw my dad for the last time, and he told me I could go home."

**ELLEN FINN:** Even though the man had told her the flight was full, he wordlessly printed out a ticket and handed it to her. Dixie ran to the plane.

**DIXIE** I don't remember anything after that. I got on the airplane. It was full. When I finally found my seat, there were  
**VAVRICHEK:** two empty seats next to me. And I just figured somebody would come and sit there, and I dreaded that. I just dreaded conversation. I wanted nothing.

Well, the plane took off, and no one else sat there. I laid down, and I just wept. I don't know if I've ever wept so much in my life.

Before I knew it, I had a pillow and a blanket, and somebody tucked me in. As the nurse, I've taken care of so many people in my life. But I was being taken care of by a stranger that put me on an airplane where I could lay down and sleep.

**ELLEN FINN:** More than 20 years later, she still wonders about the man who helped her.

**DIXIE** How did he know what I needed without me saying anything? Maybe he's gone through something himself.  
**VAVRICHEK:** Maybe he knew what it was like to say goodbye. I've flown a lot since then and always think of that wonderful stranger.

**ELLEN FINN:** I asked Dixie what she'd like to say to the man who helped her get back home.

**DIXIE** I have never forgotten that kindness shown to me. I'll never be able to say anything or do anything. It's just one  
**VAVRICHEK:** of those people that you meet once in a lifetime.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**TIM NELSON:** That was Dixie Vavrichek in our latest in the series "Thank You, Stranger," stories about small acts of kindness that have a big impact on the people they help. And if you've got a story about the kindness of others, let us know. You can email us at [minnesotanow@mpr.org](mailto:minnesotanow@mpr.org) or call our story line at 612-361-1252. That story was produced by Ellen Finn and Melissa Townsend. Music is by St. Paul's Dan Luke.