

Ken Nerger
Jessica Sirkin

You could say Ken Nerger was born unlucky. The ups and downs of fortune have written themselves in his dark eyes, his soft, hoarse voice ravaged by throat cancer, and the calm, even the way he tells his story – unflinchingly and with humor.

Ken was born with fetal alcohol syndrome. It's never easy growing up different and Ken remembers clearly the brutality of the other children toward someone weaker than themselves. The hardship in his early life gave him strength and taught him compassion. Growing up, he and his grandmother hand-raised orphaned baby raccoons.

As an adult, Ken's two careers couldn't be more different. He found a love for art and antiquities and began his adult life by moving to New York City to run a gallery that catered to the rich and famous. When that job turned sour, he quickly adapted to his second career at a chemical processing plant, working outside in dangerous conditions. But, in both worlds Ken found strength and humility and remained a man of compassion. The most important thing for him was always to be able to feed his family. Bad luck still waited for him.

Ken developed throat cancer and it nearly killed him. His voice chokes up when he describes being unable to eat and looking in the mirror to find a skeleton looking back. He survived because he could not bear to leave his wife and children. However, the chemotherapy left him with difficulty forming new memories and so after a lifetime defined by hard work, he can no longer keep a steady job to support his family. Now, his wife has two jobs to make ends meet, their house is about to be foreclosed on, and the family subsists on food-stamps. The hardest part for Ken is that now, after all this time, there is nothing he can do.

Ken can look back on the past, but, with his memory disorder, the present and future will always be uncertain for him and it's hard to rebuild a life on uncertainty. "I dream and I know what I'd like," he says, "But I don't know how to get there."

His voice is sad for a moment, but then he laughs. A life of mixed fortune has left him too strong to be beaten down for long.