



## **Angels On His Shoulders: Ruby Vine Leads With Divine Guidance**

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This is a longer version of an article published in June 2003 as an e-doc on Amazon.com.

“Tell Judi about your angels,” Thad Henry says to Ruby Vine. “Tell her about the two angels on your shoulders.” Thad is the Vice President of University Advancement at the University of New Haven in Connecticut, and we are visiting Ruby and Sharon in their spacious Ft. Lauderdale condo overlooking the ocean. We have come to thank Ruby for his million-dollar donation to the University, and to learn more about him as a person.

If you ever lived in New England, you have probably seen Ruby on television in his commercials for Railroad Salvage, one of the major salvage and damaged goods resale companies in the area. He is the founder and president of Railroad Salvage and is the owner of several other companies in Connecticut and Florida. His commercials give you some feel for the man; playful, energetic, and excited about the deal. But to spend time with him is to learn that there is a deeper and more openhearted side to him as well.

Ruby Vine is an Edgewalker, someone who is attracted to what's never been done before, and someone who feels guided by the unseen in his life. As I ask him to tell me about his angels, I settle in to get comfortable, for Ruby is a born storyteller.

He starts by saying to me, "I knew that unusual things were happening to me when I should have been in accidents and it came out well. The first time this happened was during World War II, when I was in the 28<sup>th</sup> infantry, 112<sup>th</sup> regiment, in France. We were pursuing the Germans who were headed for Germany. Our regiment was involved in liberating Paris.

"I was 18 years old and was walking down the road with a buddy of mine from the regiment. We were 'the point,' and were walking half-cautiously because we hadn't seen anyone in a number of miles. Then we came to a crossroad and there were shots. My buddy fell down and said, 'I'm hit.' I tried to carry him but he said, 'Get me a medic.' I ran ½ mile back to my platoon leader and took him back to the crossroads. My buddy was dead when we got back. Other infantry came and they found a machine gun at the four corners and they took it out.

"He's the one that got hit, and I didn't.

"Later in Germany we brought fuel to an armored outfit that had gotten stuck. We were bringing them 5 gallon buckets of fuel. They were on a hill, and as we got up the hill a machine gun opened fire on us. I found a machine gun on the ground and picked it up and opened fire on them. They stopped firing, and we went back to where we came from.

"But I wasn't hurt. That's twice."

Ruby continues to tell story after story of the war, and the close calls he had, but how – at the last minute – something seemed to protect him and keep him safe. At the time, he says, he didn't think anything about it. But in November 1944, he got hit in the leg and was evacuated to a field hospital in Belgium. He wasn't that injured, and was healing rapidly. After three weeks in the hospital, they said they needed experienced men to take a squad to the German border. They asked for volunteers and Ruby says, "I learned you shouldn't ever volunteer for anything, but I went."

They were assigned to a stream where the Germans were expected to come the next day. They set up machine guns to stop the infantry. When it got light the next morning, they were all set to hold back the oncoming troops. "We saw them coming," Ruby recollects, "and started to fire. They hung back. We heard rattling and it turned out to be tiger tanks. There was no way we could stop them. We scrambled up a hill and slid down the next and ran for the next town a mile or two away. The town was setting up barricades, but we didn't have any heavy equipment to stop them. This was the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge. We didn't know what to do. There were no officers. We were just cooks and volunteers from the hospital.

"We got to another town where everyone was trying to escape. There was quite a bit of fighting with the Germans. We had no food and no sleep for 2 to 3 days. It was very cold. We fought and held them back but finally they just overran us.

"I don't know what kept me safe. A lot of guys were killed. I didn't give much thought to it until we were captured.

"I had a string of grenades on my chest and a bandolier. When we were stopped, we had some jeeps, a half-track, and a 37mm gun behind us. We were trying to get to the

next town. The Germans had a machine gun and killed everyone in the 2 jeeps. We fought from the half-track. They overpowered us and we jumped down as the Germans came out and we put our hands up. One of them had a bayonet and he made a lunge at me. I don't know what made me do it, but I said something to him in Jewish, and it stopped him. I guess it surprised him.

“At that time, the Germans shot a lot of American prisoners because they had no way that they could take care of them. They lined us up on a hill, but they didn't shoot us. They put a few guards on us. We could hear them firing in the distance, and we later learned that they killed a lot of our guys.

“They marched us a long way, but they had very little food to give us. I found moldy bread and ate it. I was so hungry. I'm suffering still from the moldy bread. I got dysentery and jaundice. I had gotten hit and didn't realize it. It was a wound in my back, but nothing serious.

“I can remember the women and children on the side of the road, crying as they saw us go by. We were pretty tattered. The Germans would make us clean up the debris from the U.S. bombing in the streets. And they would take our clothes. Someone would come up to you and point to your boots, and if you didn't give them to him, he would shoot you.

“That's what I was saying about the angels. I was sick, it was cold, and there was no food, but I got through it. One night we were in a barn and we were so hungry that we stole oats from the horses and ate them. If the Germans had caught us doing that, they would have killed us.

“In one town we were cleaning streets and there were three guards for four of us. Our American planes were coming over, they didn’t know that there were U.S. soldiers held prisoner in this town. You could see the bombs coming out. When the first bomb hit, the Germans ran, and I ran into a house and went into a closet. It was filled with preserves and apples. I was so hungry that I ate the preserves. Then I tied up the bottom of my pants around my legs and filled my pants legs with apples.

“One of our guys was hit by the bomb. We tried to take him to the hospital but he died, and the Germans caught us again.

“In another town they put us in a building near a hospital, which was filled with recuperating Germans. We were cleaning up the streets and grounds. On the hospital grounds in an open courtyard area, there were three unexploded bombs in the ground. The Germans told us to dig them up and move them, or they would shoot us. Davey was one of my fellow prisoners, and he crossed himself. Then my other two buddies crossed themselves. I’m Jewish, but I wasn’t going to do the star, so I crossed myself too. I can’t explain it, but something protected us.

“During that time I got very sick and was delirious. I don’t remember a lot, but they walked us up to the north of Germany. They put us in cattle cars. That’s where I got frozen feet and hands.” Ruby looks down at his swollen and arthritic feet and hands with a kind of peaceful smile on his face. “The train got machine gunned, but we didn’t get hurt. A number of the guys I was with lost fingers, toes and feet from the cold. The Germans had no doctors.

“I couldn’t walk. They took us to a German prisoner-of-war camp and put us in a ‘hospital.’ It was really just a barracks. There was an English doctor there who was also

a prisoner. He tried to take care of us, but there wasn't really much he could do. The Germans were going to evacuate us, but were leaving people like me – who were close to death – for the Russians to 'save.'”

Ruby was in the camp for 2 or 3 months. He doesn't really even know because he was so sick and delirious during that time. But he says, “For me to come out of that and be talking to you 60 years later, there had to be angels. I gave you just a few cases of where the angels were on my shoulders, and a lot of people I was with aren't here today. I am. So that's why I try to help people in my life, because it's a miracle that I'm here today. There's something there that is helping me.”

He shifts gears and begins to tell stories about the miraculous things that have happened in his business life; the people who have helped him, and the people he has been able to help. He prefaces by saying, “I'm still around. I'm so fortunate to help people get started in companies. It gives me such pleasure. I've been very lucky, and lucky is such an easy word to say. But I've done things that others would say are foolish, yet I've never been sorry.”

First he tells a story of transition, of how he first begins to notice the synchronicities when he returned home. Ruby had been sent up to Lake Placid Hotel after he had been saved from the prisoner of war camp and returned home to the U.S. The hotel had been taken over by the army as a place where returning soldiers could recuperate. He was 100 lbs. when he came home, and the hotel provided three to four meals a day, and food like nuts and fruits were out all the time.

One day he decided that he would like to learn to play golf, since that was one of the activities available to recovering soldiers. He was standing in line waiting for

lessons, and a young woman came along. She offered to take him for a ride, and suddenly golf lessons lost their importance. They went about two miles down a quiet country lane when she got a flat tire. She didn't have a jack. But moments later two young men came along and they had a jack. "They saw my uniform," says Ruby, "and insisted on putting the tire on for us. It wasn't very much, yet for someone to help us right then, well... it had to be something."

"The war was over by then and an officer said, 'Do you want to go to a hospital or go home?' I wanted out. So I went home."

There were no jobs when Ruby got back to New Haven, Connecticut, which is where Ruby grew up. "So," he says, "I started selling things. I got a lot of help from others, a lot of breaks."

For example, he went into the Poli Building in New Haven, looking for office space. He was still in khakis, and that must have made an impression on the woman who showed him a large office where things were stored. She told him, "You can have this office if you clean it up and paint it. I'll give it to you for \$12 a month with electricity." Ruby seems to be thinking of his angels again and says, "To find something like that, well..." Ruby appears lost in thought for a moment.

Then he goes on to relate another story, and I begin to see a pattern in the way he describes things. At one point I said to him, "Its amazing how positive you are about life, since you had it so rough."

He chastises me and says, "I did not have it rough. I have been so lucky in my life, and over and over again I have seen lemons turn into lemonade. For example, I formed a partnership with Sid Titleman on a building in New Haven where we sold used

store fixtures. We weren't getting ahead and I got the idea that we should buy land and build our own building instead of paying rent. Sid's father knew of a piece of land for only \$500, but we didn't have the money, so his father put up the money. Sid's father decided to do a partnership with someone else on that land, but that just impelled me to try something else.

“I was a great buyer. I found another building near where I-91 is now and the rent was only \$25 a month. Sid's father really did me a favor by pushing me into finding something else, and this building was really great.”

Ruby explains one of the first business deals he made and how what seemed like a tragedy suddenly got averted at the last minute. “A friend loaned me \$300 and I spent it on plants to sell just before Easter. I got a great price on them, and put the plants in my old station wagon that had one door missing. I had to stop somewhere and was out for an hour and a half, when I came back out, and – well – you know what had happened to the plants all closed up in that warm car. I thought, ‘Oh no, these plants are all wilted, and I can't sell them now. And I just borrowed \$300 to pay for them, and I have no way to pay my friend back.’ So I put the plants in the basement of the building I had just rented, not knowing what else to do with them. The next morning I came back and all the flowers were in bloom! I sold every one of them, paid my buddy back, and bought more flowers. My angels were with me.”

Ruby's angels seem to lead him to people who are more than willing to help him. One example is Mr. Wolf, an Admiral appliance distributor. “I went to Mr. Wolf and asked him if I could sell his damaged goods,” Ruby relates. “I told him I was just out of the service and I had no money.”

Mr. Wolf said, “Son, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll give you all my damaged goods and you don’t have to give me any money until you sell them. But when I come to ask you for the money, you’d better have it.” Mr. Wolf was as good as his word, and so was Ruby, and the appliance deal really helped Ruby get established in the salvage business.

Even Ruby’s naiveté seems to serve him. He tells the story of the time he found a distributor of kitchen sets. He says, “The chairs were four different colors. I thought it was a set and I put them out in front of my building and people would buy them like crazy.”

It doesn’t seem to matter what he buys and sells. He just seems to have an intuitive sense of how to make money. He soon got involved in real estate because he needed the buildings to store and sell all the damaged goods he was buying. He says he always made money in real estate, but it was because so many people were helpful. For example, Ruby was friendly with people in the drug store business and the owner was selling a piece of property. “He helped me get a mortgage and I was never expecting that kind of help. I had some breaks that you wouldn’t believe”

People also taught him a lot about business, and even more about values and integrity. “A banker taught me, ‘Ruby, I’ll give you anything you want. But always tell me if you have a problem, and always tell the truth.’ He was an angel, and my angels led me to him.

Eventually Ruby got into buying entire businesses and into helping other people finance their businesses. Westinghouse was going through a major restructuring and was selling the Blakeslee Pretress plant, an industrial construction business in Branford, CT. Through a family connection, Ruby had met Mario, the plant manager, and decided to

buy the plant and let Mario and his management team run the company. “Mario stayed with me. He ran the business and I gave him part of the ownership. Three people have been with me since the beginning. They get a profit before I do.”

When negotiating for the building, Westinghouse offered to finance the deal but wanted \$500,000 down, which Ruby didn't have. But why was Westinghouse so willing to finance the deal? It turns out that it could have been because of the raincoats.

A few months earlier a friend called to tell Ruby that he had purchased 6-8 truckloads of London Fog raincoats, but they were full of mud. The friend said, “Ruby can you help me out? I can't sell this many raincoats.”

Ruby gleefully tells me, “I came up with an ad. ‘We've got the dirtiest raincoats. You buy them and wash them. If they don't wash out brand new, we'll return your money. I sold them for \$19.99 and only paid \$10 for them.’ The GM of Westinghouse bought one of those coats. That's before I met him. Maybe that's why he was so willing to help us with Blakeslee. He knew our store.”

So how did Ruby find the \$500,000 for the down payment? From CBs. He had a lead on CB radios from 2 distributors. He had asked a friend to go in as partners with him. “I went to the factory in California where they had 12,000 CB sets. They wanted \$38 a piece for them. These were 23 channel sets and the new sets were more channels and the manufacturers had to get rid of them in a certain amount of time, so they were selling them at great discount.

“I called a friend who has a department store. He says, ‘I'll take 100.’ Another friend said he'd take 500. And another friend said, ‘I'll take 1000.’ I was never going to get rid of them at that rate, and then the partner changes his mind about the deal and I

have to sell all 12,000. He did me a great favor! I sold them at a very low price through Railroad Salvage, and they went like hotcakes. Every one of them flew out of the store, and because the partner backed out, I got all the profit and it gave me the \$500,000 I needed to buy Blakeslee.”

At the heart of it, Ruby is a businessman-philosopher. He says, “Life is a lot of fun. Its what you make it. A lot of people look at lemons. I make lemonade.” He continues, “The more you make something of yourself without expecting returns, the better.” He goes back to reminiscing about World War II for an example.

“When we were prisoners of war, they put us in a crowded boxcar in winter. Some guys died. A lot of guys lost fingers and toes. That’s where I developed the problem I have with my feet. There wasn’t much to keep us going. No food, no water, and it was freezing. I had 3 cigarettes in my pocket. I gave them away. A lot of guys would have traded them for something, but what was I going to do with them. I don’t smoke, and there was no food to trade them for. I thought it would help them. The guys said, ‘If there is anything we can do for you, let us know.’ They could never do anything, but I’ve been repaid a thousand times over.

“You help someone because you’ve been helped. If you’ve got it, you help. Good things happen to me because I’ve helped others. You don’t give to get, but when you give, you do get.

“ I want my grandchildren to learn to be a mensch – a good man. I’ve had so many good people help me and I can never repay it. If you teach your children to be good, they’ve learned something and that’s the most important thing.

Ruby made his fortune finding value in things that other people might see as worthless or junk. He takes great joy in salvaging things that might otherwise get discarded. And if you look at his early beginnings, you might make the mistake that I did and see it as painful and difficult. But, perhaps because of his angels, Ruby sees each day of his life as a gift, and as an opportunity to help others the way he's been helped.

I said to him, "Ruby, it seems like you have been an angel in other peoples' lives."

"Oh no," he says modestly. "It's not like that. But people who come in contact with me seem to do very well. I had some breaks that you wouldn't get as a regular businessman. The people that I've helped are doing well. I'm just trying to repay what's been done for me." Well, Ruby, I don't care what you say. I still think you are an angel.