By Bruce Feldman

She didn’t know I was a reporter. It just started out as two people making small talk as a three-hour flight was about to take off. She had asked me to help put her shoulder bag in the bin above our heads.

American Airlines Flight 2503 left LAX bound for Chicago O’Hare at 11:19 a.m. PT on October 19. She was heading to South Bend for the USC-Notre Dame game that weekend. I was going to Madison, Wisc. By the time the wheels were up, she had told me how she’d only missed 10 USC home games in 50 years. I'd showed her pictures on my cell phone of my kids. Then, she told me she has been battling cancer for the past 30 months, and I just listened. Before we landed three hours later, I’d realized I’d never look at USC coach Clay Helton the same way again.

Jan Moser Dyer wanted to go to USC from the moment she heard that legendary Trojans coach John McKay said that if his team won the national championship, he was going to give his kids a pool. McKay led USC to a national title in 1962, his third season with the Trojans. Three years later, Jan was there as a freshman to watch Notre Dame crush the Trojans. “Fifty-one-to nothing, I still remember the score,” she says. In her junior year, McKay led them to another national championship.

Jan, a CPA, met her husband John after she answered an ad in The Wall Street Journal. He was a headhunter. She was applying for a CFO job. They were engaged six weeks after they first met. They never had children, but they traveled, and they always had USC football. She never missed a Trojans home game except for when she was recovering from eight separate knee surgeries.

She never quite realized just how much her alma mater or its football team
meant to her until John passed away in 2002—after all, we never really grasp how much we lean on some things until we get knocked off balance. John was only 57. He'd just completed a physical two months earlier, but Jan came into the kitchen one morning and found him with the sports page folded in his hands, reading a story about USC. Doctors told her it was “an angel kiss,” and that he probably wasn’t in pain when he passed. She suspects the cause of death may have been due to a cerebral stroke, but she’s not sure. She never wanted to read the death certificate.

Her way of dealing with John’s passing was to throw herself into her work. She’d grind out 14- to 16-hour days doing computer consulting and crisis management. “The only time I really let up was during football season,” she says, her voice breaking up. “I never really grieved. I just put it all in the corner and left it in the corner. It was probably not the smartest thing.”

Not long after John had passed, Jan went to a USC scholarship support gathering. The Trojans’ new football coach was there to give a talk. Pete Carroll had an underwhelming first season at USC, going 6–6. Jan approached the energetic coach.

“I lost my husband very suddenly and I need something to hold on to,” she said. “I’m counting on you to get us some wins.”

Carroll smiled. “Can I give you a hug? Sure.”

Carroll gave Trojan fans a lot more than just some wins. He led them on a decade-long adrenal rush, surfing atop the college football world. His teams won two national titles and finished among the top four in seven consecutive seasons. Carroll generated a celebrity glow around the program, from having Will Ferrell and Snoop Dogg pal around with the players to using music legend Bill Withers to prank his players or to having hundreds of fans attending a regular weekday practice. Everything was upbeat in Carrolland. For Jan, Carroll was also always there to sign USC items that would be auctioned off for juvenile diabetes. “That man got me through five really difficult years.”

Carroll, of course, left L.A. for the NFL. NCAA sanctions weakened the program, as the Trojans cycled through a series of coaches and interim coaches with only one top-10 finish over the next six seasons. Jan’s own life had also taken a turn for the worse: In April 2015 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. The Trojans floundered that season: Head coach Steve Sarkisian’s battles with addiction unraveled, overshadowing a team that began the year No. 8 but finished 8–6. Sarkisian was fired and interim coach Clay Helton was kept on as the permanent head coach. Helton might not have Carroll’s magnetism—What college coach does?—but he did have an authenticity that connected with players searching for stability.

Jan and Helton met in February 2016 at a dinner for the Trojan League of Los Angeles. Jan had been uncomfortable going out because of her hair loss from her chemo treatments.

Helton and Jake Olson, the Trojans’ blind long snapper who Carroll had befriended almost a decade earlier as cancer was robbing the then-12-year-old of his sight, were the featured guests. Jan sat at a table in the back wearing a baseball hat and pink latex gloves. She walked up to Helton after the dinner.

Jan told Helton how she’d met Carroll years earlier and explained what he and his teams had done indirectly for her without even knowing it.

“Now, I’m fighting with cancer and I’m counting on you.”

Helton reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. He asked if it’d be O.K. if he kept in touch. Just to check in on her from time to time. “This is my private cell. I’m going to call your phone so you have my number in it.”

Jan gave him the number. He keyed it in and the USC fight song, “Fight On,” began to play as her phone rang.

Helton smiled.

“Well, what else would I have?” Jan said.

Helton’s family dealt with its own cancer battle a few years earlier. His wife Angela was diagnosed with breast cancer right after he was hired at USC in 2010. “She had four surgeries and ended up having a double mastectomy to eliminate the issue,” Helton says. “We were very fortunate. Her mom had it. She had it. Thank the Lord that it was found early. I watched her go through those surgeries. Was grateful that it’s done but not everybody gets that opportunity to be able to get past it.”

Jan and Helton would text weekly during the 2016 season as the rookie head coach led the Trojans on a nine-game winning streak after a tumultuous first month. Three hours before USC defeated Penn State to win the Rose Bowl, Jan’s phone chimed with a text. It was from Helton.


Helton said his relationship with Jan
is part of what makes the USC bond so special. “I’ve been fascinated by the whole Trojan family,” he says. “This community is different. It’s so passionate, and we’re closer than maybe a lot of other universities. Trojans take care of Trojans.

“Jan is battling and fighting. She’s trying to be the definition of Fight On. I’ve always believed that the greatest gift that you can give somebody is your time. What is it to take 30 seconds to respond back if it just means that little bit in helping someone out in a dire time, lift her spirits?”

“My brother is always telling me, ‘Don’t distract him,’” says Jan. “I limit it to texting him once a week.”

Jan’s cancer, though, hasn’t been as restrained.

“The cancer has metastasized through my body,” she says of what is now her Stage IV condition. It ate through her femur; she now walks with the help of a walker. She has had more breast surgeries. The week of the Trojans’ season opener this year against Western Michigan, she was in pre-op going into surgery. She lobbied her doctors to let her attend the game, but with the temperature expected to be near 100 degrees at kickoff, they gave her the thumbs down. Week 2 was a bigger test—Stanford was visiting the Coliseum. But she had complications from the surgery and was back in the hospital. She gave the staff a scare that day: “I was screaming so much in the hospital at the TV, the nurses came running. Some patients thought something pretty awful was going on with me.”

The Trojans were hosting Texas in Week 3. Jan couldn’t miss another game. But her friends and doctors told her she shouldn’t go. The heat was still a concern, especially sitting in a packed stadium.

She texted Helton: Coach, I don’t know if I can make it. Sorry I can’t be there to root you, the staff and the team on.

Helton texted her back the day before the game.

*We need you back in the Coliseum. I’ll continue to pray for you. I think I have a solution that’ll make the doctors and your family happy. Why don’t you use my personal suite and just have a great day and enjoy Trojan football. Bring as many doctors as you want.*

Two hours before USC kicked off against the Longhorns, Helton texted Jan just to make sure everything in the suite was going well. USC ended up winning in double overtime, 27–24.

“I’d told her, hopefully we give you an entertaining ball game,” Helton says. “I didn’t know it would be that entertaining!”

Helton grew up in the coaching business. His dad Kim spent four decades coaching in the NFL, CFL and college. Clay learned before he ever got the USC job that the bigger the platform was, the bigger the opportunity it presented to make an impact on people.

“I get it and I hope our players get it,” Helton says. “Our players have this stage and we hope they can make the most of it. Football just opens doors. It opens doors for yourself as far as an education and a livelihood but it also opens doors for you to be able to help others and gives you a stage to be able to change lives. People think these guys are superheroes. Well, a superhero is supposed to have a pure heart and servant to others.”

Jan won’t be able to make it to USC’s Cotton Bowl matchup with Ohio State later this week, but she’ll be watching—and screaming for them through the TV.

“It’s really nice to have other things to hang onto,” she says. “The Trojan family is real, and I’ve been very lucky to have met this man. I treasure his texts and messages.”

She says she can’t wait until next fall when she makes the trip to Texas, when the Trojans visit the Longhorns.