

When Pain Goes Unnoticed: Al's Story

My uncle and godfather, **Al Burgess**, was one of those people everyone loved to be around — funny, charismatic, and endlessly tough. He spent his life working with his hands in construction and woodworking, taking on every job and every ache with the same attitude: *you push through it.*



Years of physical labor, smoking, and hard living had already taken their toll. He'd lost all his teeth at a young age and wore full dentures. Because he'd had them so long, his bone changed over time, and they often didn't fit right. But he was used to discomfort. He didn't think someone without teeth needed a dentist.

When pain began in his mouth, he ignored it — assuming it was just irritation from his dentures. At lunch with his adult children, he quietly switched from ordering his favorite baked lamb to soup, saying it hurt too much to chew. That change, small as it seemed, was the first visible sign something was seriously wrong in his mouth.

Soon after, his daughter took him to the emergency room. He was diagnosed with **stage IV oral cancer**. He passed away several months later, on Christmas Day.

Al's story is a reminder that **pain in the mouth is never “just dental.”** When it's overlooked, or when people don't think they “need” a dentist anymore, the consequences can be devastating.

This is why advocacy matters — to notice the signs, to make sure no one's pain is dismissed, and to connect oral health to overall health before it's too late.