

Lurisse Ulen not type to give up

By MARILYN RICHARDS

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"I have seen too many people just fall to pieces," says Lurisse Ulen.

"I'm not the type to do that," she adds. Many of her friends express their admiration at her outlook on life.

People with less problems than Lurisse have "turned to drink and despair" but she is in more control of her life than her multiple sclerosis is of her body.

Multiple sclerosis is a disease of the nervous system which medical science have not determined the cause or cure.

Lurisse is the mother of three children: Jenny age 13, Pee Wee age 9 and Michelle age 8. She is also the recent widow of popular pilot Ben Ulen.

Last week she celebrated her 33rd birthday and this writer wished her "a happy 29th." In good spirits she retorted "I want credit for every year because I earned it!" she added. "You and I suffer the 'white woman's curse' because we have line necks, though Eskimos get wrinkles, white women also get lines."

Ulen died of a sudden heart attack last summer at the young age of 44. He was a co-pilot on the Boeing 737. He was born in Wiseman, educated in Seattle, served a hitch in the Air Force and started flying bush in the Pilatus Porter, the Otter and the F-27 and later the jet.

"At one time a couple of years ago, Benny was the only company pilot licensed to fly everything they had," Lurisse proudly reminisced. "You know they always called him Benny, never Ben or Benjamin. And they did the same to all the Native pilots they call Rhinehold Thiele Rhiny, Tom Richards Tommy and William English (Benny's uncle) Billy."

The Ulen's were transferred from Fairbanks to Anchorage last spring. They purchased a split level house near the airport and near the schools for the children. The five bedroom house is now up for sale and vacant. The new house never became a home. It was the scene for two birthday parties

but was dark and undecorated during the recent holidays.

Lurisse, the daughter of former Nomeite Edith Thompson, purchased a ranch style house last month. The one level structure is better suited for her since she is in a wheelchair.

The Ulen's discovered the disease while she was pregnant with PeeWee (Benny Jr.) The doctors warned her not to get pregnant or the disease would progress faster. She did not heed their advice but has no regrets. In recent years her speech, eyesight and balance have deteriorated but not her sense of humor.

Last summer she journeyed to California to become an out patient in an exclusive clinic which specializes in "acupressure" similar to acupuncture though it is a method of finding "body points" in therapy. For instance, a point on the foot may relieve an ailment of another organ. These clinics have increasingly grown in medical prestige and popularity.

Acupressure, reputedly practiced by the Egyptians and Chinese for thousands of years, is receiving more respect and attention and not as easily dismissed as a fad or a medical "rip off."

The Californian clinic also specializes in treating MS patients who display early symptoms of the disease.

Lurisse is extremely confident that this treatment is legitimate and may help her. "People are always expecting me to break down and fall apart, but they're in for a long wait," she says. "She is the most courageous person I know," says Nick Oppegarde, another pilot.

"Of course I wish things were different. Most everybody wishes that about their lives, but I accept God's will," she adds, "I'm happy, I'm content and at peace with myself and I have friends."

Last year brought many tragic changes for the Ulen family. This year they may serve as an inspiration to others more or less as fortunate for their story is a rare combination of love, and bravery. For others, her independence and talent may help eradicate the myth and social stigma associated with MS and handicapped human beings.