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Thank you for investing both your time and attention to reading this introduction into the times and history of the man for which this scholarship celebrates. It was created to support his love of learning, honor his memory, and to also "Pay it Forward." Since I will never be able to repay him for all the positive influences he had on my life, it is my hope this scholarship will create a ripple effect of aide and encouragement for people unknown to both Bill McKenna and myself. Most honestly, I want Bill to come alive for you even if only for a brief moment as you read my memories of our friendship.

The story of why you are sharing in Bill's largesse:

Bill McKenna was an average man, who in my eyes, stood high above the crowd. He had to turn down an acceptance to Harvard Law School for want of \$50.00 extra in tuition. The Great Depression was at its height in the early thirties, and nearly 10 years away from ending. Most able-bodied men were pounding the streets looking for that elusive thing called "steady work" or any work at all. Very few were pursuing a legal education even if it only cost \$ 400 a year. Bill, who had lost both his parents in short succession and their family home due to the inability to pay the funeral director, was doing just that. He was paying his way through the newly opened Boston School of Law. It was \$50.00 dollars CHEAPER than Harvard.

Over the course of many long and wonderful conversations, the limited details of those experiences and others would be shared via his ever-present Irish gift of storytelling. Yes, he confessed, he was reduced to creating a concoction of hot water and ketchup in bottles and drinking it for food. He often entered and exited his room by scaling up and down the fire escape to avoid having to face his landlady. He was embarrassed that occasionally he was not able to pay his full rent on time. She had mouths to feed too, he said. But she would always tell him, "Give me what you can, when you can." Bill shared with me he suspected "she was just happy I didn't try to skip out like other working stiffs when things turned sour."

In later years, when grown successful, he would drink Bourbon, "never that fancy Scotch." Enjoying a good sipping Bourbon while ensconced by a warm fireplace during a snowy New England winter night often leads one to relive old memories. It was during such a night he made the throwaway statement, "I unloaded enough Scotch for old Joe Kennedy (JFK's father) off the coast at Rocky Point during prohibition, to hate the looks of the stuff." I guess it was pragmatism vs. legalism with eating and paying the bills that won out. The funniest story — and there were many — was the tale about one of his

earliest legal wins upon passing the bar. Well, it appears there was a reason Bill and Rose never owned a home after they could well afford one. He only invested in financial vehicles. He was the first to inform me of the etymology of the word “mortgage.” In its earliest formation, it translates from French to “death pledge” or “dead man's hand.” With the ink barely dry on his legal license and a freshly minted JD to follow his name, he said, “I sued that bastard Funeral Director and WON!!!” I speak the truth when I say, that was the one and only time I ever heard him use a vulgar word.

Rose and Bill never had children. Consequently, Bill never charged any fees for legal adoption services. Both the McKennas and my parents were very strong Catholics. After 26 plus years of marriage, when I was 11, my parents sought a church sanctioned separation. In 1961, this was a rare happening. It required the couple to get permission from a Diocesan representative and a meeting with a Catholic lawyer. Bill met with my parents separately, telling my father he would not send a bill until they were back together. Sadly, they did not, and he never had the occasion to send the bill.

Bill was a complex man. He was a charmer, a man of integrity, a task master, and a lover of learning. He, like all of us, had his fair share of flaws, I am sure. Emotionally, the Lord brought healing to both of us through our time together. He was a father figure to me, and I became the daughter fate had robbed Rose and Bill of having. Well into old age, and with a failing body, he told me, “I love to keep learning, and the greatest gift is curiosity. Don't ever forget that, even if you are locked up in a fancy apartment.” He was always generous to me, verbally and in his life lessons. I asked him if he ever regretted not going to Harvard. He merely sighed and said, “Things would have been so much easier.” Harvard's additional \$50 a year or semester (unclear) was a deal breaker, and impacted the rest of his life. He sacrificed a great deal for his education. He honored and fed his lifelong love of learning. He grew rich enough to leave over a million dollars to charity and had no interest in status. He always looked out for the underrepresented. He loved the English language and the root source of words. He was highly accomplished but remained a humble man. He never forgot his roots and always sought to make the way easier for others. He said to me once, “We each give out of our excess; me my money, you your love.” That remains my happiest moment with him and I will carry that memory to my grave.

This scholarship is an expression of that love for him, and a gift to you. Please, “Pay it Forward” in whatever way you choose. I am not embarrassed at the small amount of this award. In time, it will grow. Plus, I recall the difference \$50 a year made to a good man. He never elaborated, but that sigh of regret about the missed chance at a Harvard education lingers in my memory still. I speak, I am sure for both Bill and myself when I wish you the gift of a lifelong quest for learning, ever-present curiosity, and an openness

to love in all the forms it presents itself to you. It is my hope you also will “Pay it Forward” through the use of your MSW.

Facts of his life:

- 1) He was born in Providence, R.I. in 1911 and died there at the age of 79 in 1990.
- 2) He graduated from Providence College in 1931 and Boston College of Law in 1934.
- 3) He was attached to a Marine Corps Intelligence Unit assigned to Hawaii. His education, and the fact that he possessed a verified photographic memory, must have been valuable to the war effort. At the close of the war, he was discharged as a Lt. Commander. Since he would have been nearly 30 years old when he entered the service, it is unclear to me if he volunteered or was drafted.
- 4) After a long courtship, he married Rose Finnegan, a Kathrine Hepburn doppelganger. She was also my mother's lifelong friend from High School. Their “wedding breakfast” took place in NYC, while he was on leave from the Navy.
- 5) He returned to private Law practice and worked with Citizens Bank as a corporator until 1985.
- 6) He argued cases before the Rhode Island Supreme Court as well as the lower state courts.
- 7) He became a very savvy investor, but refused to own or invest in real estate.
- 8) He left in excess of a million dollars to charity.

The Zeitgeist of his times:

Bill was a first-generation American. It took great courage and desperation for his parents to risk everything for a better life “over the pond.” Times were hard in Ireland, but they were no bed of roses here in America for immigrants. While I can not confirm this, I suspect his parents only had a few years of “proper schooling.” Yet, an ingrained respect for education and prose as well as a strong oral tradition was present. I do not know if they lived to see him graduate from college. I know they were both deceased by the time he had obtained his law degree. His father would have more than likely been among the many Irish men in Rhode Island, who, after working all day, stood guard over the construction of St. Joseph's Catholic church on Hope Street. The need was predicated by the vandalism created by the not-so-silent members of the “Know Nothing Party.” Women and men both worked when they could, while tending the family. This was not an easy accomplishment and was often met with defeat since signs in shops and advertisements frequently reflected “Irish Need Not Apply.” Their life was not easy, nor was his march toward manhood. During his youth, he volunteered to teach the other wave of newcomers, the Italians, how to box at the Italian American Club facility. He understood that the “Wops” were no more respected than the “Micks.” The only respected moniker of the day was “WASP,” White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. He understood that a man could not always depend on his wit and charm to protect him, although that stood him in good stead on most occasions. He also believed in the rule of

law and the protection of the disenfranchised. It saddens me that 34 years (presently 2024), after his death the targeted groups may have changed, but rampant bigotry still finds a comfortable foothold in our society. We are now too “politically correct” to use such hateful types of terms openly today. Still, hate and fear of those who look or think differently from ourselves continue to prevail. Perhaps, your work may dilute its impact and help create unity where there is division.

My history with Rose and Uncle Bill:

While I had known both of them all my life growing up, I interacted with Rose the most. She had graduated from Normal School as a trained teacher and volunteered to tutor me in spelling in grade school. It was a short-lived experiment. The poor lady had to share with my mother that her best efforts had failed her. I was hopeless! I was only diagnosed with dyslexia in my 40s. Also, I would see Rose at my Mother's H.S. class reunions, which Mother hosted each year at Buttonwoods, our summer home on Narragansett Bay. My interaction with Bill, on the other hand, was a very different matter. Bill was very tall, over 6 feet, and in possession of a deep imposing voice. One day while I was perhaps in 4th grade, Mother asked me to call Rose. I dialed the number. It was answered by a deep baritone male voice saying, “City morgue, you stab em, we slab em.” I stammered out “wrong number” and hung up the line. I told Mother. She laughed and said “Oh, that was just Bill McKenna!” All well and good for her, but I was rattled and never interacted with him until decades later. After her retirement to Florida, Mother would return to Rhode Island each year for an extended catch-up visit with family and friends. In the late 80s, she was flying home the next day and hurriedly dialed the number she always had for Rose and Bill. In her haste, she misdialed and got a disconnected number recording. Mother became very upset, thinking perhaps they were in some unknown nursing home or dead. She was worried since she did not know. In an attempt to comfort her, I told her I would call their number the next day or see what I could find out.

This I did. She had dialed incorrectly. The phone was answered by a frail male voice, no, “stab em, slab em” this time. I kindly asked for Rose, I still remembered my last exchange! It was Bill who replied; she had passed away that Spring. I explained who I was and that my Mother wished for me to check in on them. Reluctantly, Bill agreed. He was living within walking distance of my office at that time. Over the next few years, it became my habit to bring him lunch each day and visit on Friday nights. Bill was unable to leave his apartment due to his limited mobility caused by bone damage, leaving him unable to bend his left hip. We became fast friends and he became a surrogate father to me.

Personal Note: Upon his death when I was 40 years old, he left me the extraordinary

amount of \$150,000 for my “freedom fund.” It served me very well. A number of years later, I was able to retire early after 30 years of work with the Rhode Island State Dept. of Rehabilitation and Social Services. I had five years of freedom afterward to study nationally and internationally with many of the leading Jungian Psychologists of the time, while exploring my passion for Jungian Dream work. It also allowed me to supplement my mother's extra needs both prior to and after she became a paraplegic. With an ever-growing financial security cushion, at 60 years old, I made one of my biggest changes. Knowing only one person in the area, I sold my home in Rhode Island and moved to Nags Head, part of the barrier islands of North Carolina (OBX). After 27 years, I returned to direct service social work. In Nags Head, I took on the dual position of the only Hospice Social Worker and Bereavement Councilor for Dare County, N.C. Home Health and Hospice. In typical small state Rhode Island fashion, I thought how hard could a county job be? Well OBX, (the home of “The lost Colony”), is a string of islands connected by bridges. Nags Head, where I live, is only 3 miles wide from sound to ocean and is surrounded by water. My first home visit was 110 miles round trip, well past the Hatteras Lighthouse. The pay was low, the cost of living high, resources very limited, all of which contributed to the high turnover in the position I accepted. I served for 7 years, becoming the longest-lasting Hospice Social Worker in their long history. I loved every moment and had my “freedom fund” from Bill to supplement the venture. Upon my death, more of that cushion will find its way into this fledgling scholarship. For now, I will trust that a strong and tall oak tree will grow from this small seed. I have chosen to support your efforts to obtain an MSW because the world is more than ever in need of strong, well-educated professionals in the field. Also, you will need an MSW to get those pesky insurance companies to pay for your third-party reimbursement.

May you have a truly fulfilling personal life and a fine professional one as well.

Sincerely,

Barbara Taft Shea

5/15/2024