



THE IMPORTANT THINGS

By Monroe S. Miller

It was the height of the golf season and yet at least a hundred golf course superintendents from all over Wisconsin gathered in the basement of the First Methodist Church in downtown Manchester.

The occasion wasn't a happy one. We were there to pay our last respects to a friend and a colleague of long standing. To a man, we were surprised when we learned of Del Donnelly's sudden passing three days ago.

Del had been the golf course superintendent at British Hollow Country Club for forty years. In fact, he was the only superintendent they'd had until Del retired. He graduated from the UW-Madison, was hired when the course was under construction and stayed until he retired a number of years ago.

Everybody was sad, make no mistake about that. But as I remarked to Tom Morris, Bogey Calhoun, Ed Middleton and several others standing nearby, the feeling there in the Fireside Room of the church wasn't swept away with gloom and depression.

We were there to pay respect to a man who had lived a life most people on this earth only dream about. Del was one of the happiest and most satisfied men any of us had ever met or had the pleasure to know.

Kids and grandkids, brothers and sisters and other family members had swollen, red eyes. And a few of us had misty eyesight for a bit. But there was no sobbing, no uncontrolled wailing. Just sadness.

It was a perfect mid-summer day in Wisconsin. Everywhere—from Lake Geneva to Cornucopia and LaCrosse to Sturgeon Bay—it was green. A statewide shower the day before had cleared the humidity from the air and a high pressure system was giving us clear, cool air from Canada. The sky was a beautiful blue, and the 80 degree temperature felt good.

Del's oldest son John approached us, extending his handshake to all of us.

"Dad would be so proud seeing so many of his peers here today." John said with a tone of sincere gratitude. "This is the kind of day golf course superintendents love, and I am grateful it's like this on the day of his funeral."

Most of us had watched the Donnelly children grow up. John was the first to work on the golf course, starting at age 14, back when that wasn't a risk. Then came Sam, Elizabeth, Phil and last, Bill.

The kids and their father got along famously well, despite being together continuously, or almost so, all summer long. Their summer work, along with some help from Mom and Dad, had put every single one of them through the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Del and Vi were both alums and proud their kids chose the same university they had attended. It was Bill who told me once, while working at my course on weekends during a spring semester, that neither parent had ever even mentioned to any of their children that they wanted them in school at the UW. Each child had made his or her own decision.

I couldn't help but think, every once in a while, how much the Donnelly family reminded me of a farm family. They were up early, working together, following the seasons and worrying about the weather. I had mentioned that to Del on one occasion—he and I both had the good fortune of being raised on a farm—and he agreed with me, adding the "sometimes Holsteins are more rational than irate golfers." We both laughed while looking around to make certain no golf player had heard us.

Manchester, Wisconsin was proud of Del. He had been the kind of citizen every community needs, giving freely of his time and talent to make it a better place. He had been a school board member for years, and a leading advocate for the best education Manchester residents could give to their kids.

Del made sure, through his volunteer efforts, that MHS teams played on good fields—football, track and soccer. For forty years other schools in the conference drooled over Manchester's beautifully grassed athletic fields.

And the golf teams from all over that part of Wisconsin loved to travel to Manchester for a high school golf meet. Del, with the total support from British Hollow C.C. members, made every high school tournament seem as important as the U.S. Open. Many of British Hollow's members had played on the high school team as youths and to this day worshiped Del Donnelly.

From many terms on the church council to his annual chairmanship of the American Cancer Society fund drive, Del was part and parcel of his town, a strong thread in the life of a prosperous Wisconsin community. He led the kind of life far too few of us are able or even capable of living. He gave back far more than he took.

Liz and Sam had been standing on the edge of our group, listening carefully to the talk about their father, wiping away a tear now and again.

Tom Morris was talking. "More than a few times we've listened to colleagues who moved to large cities and big courses say to Del, 'you could be managing a golf course like mine, Del. Why don't you leave British Hollow C.C. and Manchester and get a course like the one I have? You'll make more money, meet some big time players, and establish contact with really important people.'"

"Del was always polite," Tom continued, "and would point out he was pretty happy with his life in Manchester."

"I remember one time in particular. A guy—you all would recognize the name—was back in Wisconsin for a wedding the weekend before Field Day at the Noer Research Facility. So

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he decided to stay another two days and attend. A bunch of us were sitting around in the afternoon enjoying a cold bottle of Garten Brau when he started with that familiar line on Del. The essence was why, with his obvious talent and knowledge and experience and education, did Del continue to live and work in Manchester.

"Del smiled as he politely listened. When the bluster died down a bit, he asked the big shot, 'how far do you live from work?'

"The answer was 'about 50 minutes if I leave at 5 a.m. The trip home can run an hour and a half.'

"Del replied that he walked over to his office at British Hollow each day and the walk took about 10 minutes," Tom recalled.

I could see Liz and Sam look at one another, smile, and then look past the group to Phil, who had joined us. He also knew what was going on.

Tom continued. "Then Del asked him how far to church. The reply was 'about 40 minutes by car on Sunday morning.'

'Too bad,' Del said, 'Vi and I can walk to the First M.E. in about 7 minutes, although we do drive once in a while when it's real cold in deep winter. The kids bike to confirmation and MYF. And, even in the summer, I'm close enough to ring the church bell for each of the two services.'"

Tom was grinning as he told his story about his lifelong friend. "The guy was getting the picture. Del asked him a few more question—'do you play golf at your course?'

The curt answer was 'no, playing privileges aren't part of the job.'

The scene Tom described had been repeated many times in Del's career. We knew he didn't really care. He was a UW Honors grad, a decorated Korean war veteran, and an ambitious man. He didn't have anything to prove to anyone. He could have done whatever he wanted, wherever he wanted to do it, and been a great success at it.

What he chose, obviously, was a rich and fulfilling life, a happy family, a tranquil community and a job that challenged him every day. It was his choice and Vi's choice. And clearly they were successful with their choice.

The things that were important to Del were right there in that beautiful, quiet and somewhat rural Wisconsin community.

The day after Del's passing, the Manchester Courier carried an editorial about Del. The whole community was mourning his death and would miss him, just like all of us.

Phil spoke up, emotionally moved by the quiet conversation that was, in reality, a tribute to his father.

"My dad had a grasp of the important things. He stayed at British Hollow not because he lacked any ambition, but because of a lack of desire for material things. Money was less important to him—far less—than the quality of life for us and my mom and himself. No one could do more than he did to earn the respect of his children."

Slowly the huge crowd in the church basement dwindled. We were among the last to think about leaving.

It seemed so final that we were hesitant to start home.

Before we left we got together with Vi and Del's family to tell them we were going to name our annual scholarship after him.

"We are going to miss Del terribly," I said to Vi. The guys all nodded.

"But we will never forget him," Tom said. "Never."

Tom was right.

Sometimes we are lucky enough to a person like Del Donnelly. It may happen only once in a lifetime. We learn from such people the true meaning of a good life by the example they set. Del knew what mattered and let that guide him.

There could be no greater lesson for any of us. 🍀

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