

Good Friend

"Hey, this is your Good Friend D.K., looks like we're playing phone tag again. I'll be home about 8:30, after church choir, I'd like to talk to you, call when you can." January 25.

I left another message on his machine about 11 a.m. the next morning. I didn't feel, or hear the urgency in his message, and he never got mine. January 26.

As I sit in this funk of emotional loss, I am surrounded by the huge technological advances of our lifetime. I can contact nearly anyone at anytime for any reason and they can get back to me via E-mail, modem, answering machine, voice-mail or fax. However, there is one message I will never be able to tell Randy, the one thing I should have told him years ago.

Not so long ago, our friendship wasn't left on machines. A smile went with a greeting but the smile possessed the meaning. A handshake was firm and held long and no words were needed. Many dawn hours passed as we drove in excited silence to our favorite hunting places, and the wind was the only sound as it passed around the truck and from the dog. His sheepish grin was his apology for making birdie on the 18th for the win, again. These are the communications that had value and remain priceless today. No matter how hard I work the machines around me, they will never be able to communicate what the heart feels, nor the memories we had planned to make.

We gave Randy a lot of nicknames, "D.K." was an old CB name from the '70s, "Click" was his hunting name and "Slim" was his weight class. He recognized any friend's voice no matter what we called him. Strangely, I can never remember him using any of these names, before that last message.

We were shirt tail cousins, but I considered him a brother in every way. We had the good fortune to have families that belonged to the Austin Country Club, and at very young ages we became "dew golfers." Bob Carlson let us keep our clubs in the caddy shack where we could climb through the window in the early morning and get started playing in the dew.

We caddied a lot then and decided to go into business together shining shoes at the club. We were 11 and the club gave us a closet to get started in, and Randy's father, Don, built us a buffing machine. When business was slow, we hit lots of golf balls, retrieved them and hit them again. He had that same smooth swing, even then, and he could putt!

Our golf kept us together all our lives. We worked on the course at ACC for Irv Novak. Our first job was to dig, by hand, the two side bunkers on what now is the third hole. The trailer we loaded had steel wheels and Irv could hear that squeaky old thing every time we would dump it.

Randy thought it would make a good flower garden, and today, it sits just off the 11th tee, buried to the axle in soil and flowers.

Through high school and junior college, we won two Minnesota State team titles and finished second once (my fault). Randy was the competitor. He was unpretentious; he performed with humility and sportsmanship. He loved golf, it was never a game; it was life.

After junior college, Randy went to the University of Minnesota for a short time but the best school for turf in his mind was Penn State University where he graduated with Honors. After graduation, Randy went back to work for Irv Novak in Fargo, North Dakota. He met Julie there. It was 1974 in Alexandria, in the middle of the winter. Mike Nelson and I stood up with him on one of his happiest days. Soon after that, Randy got his first Super job at Owatonna Country Club, where his profession rooted and his obsession with perfection built his reputation.

He built a family, too. Erica, now a junior, and Drew, his enthusiastic son, is a 7th grader. Randy brought Drew along every time we hunted this fall, and there were some bonding memories developed. Drew will be on my call list for opening day pheasants, forever.

We often talked about building our own course and in 1991 he got his opportunity. The Willingers Golf Club in Northfield is a wonderful course and Randy poured his profession and his heart into its refinements. With one success comes opportunity and Dean Hartle, from Owatonna, wanted to build Hidden Creek Golf Club on his farm just east of town, right in Randy's backyard. It was a perfect fit. Randy was so excited. I had never seen him so directed and happy. He was building greens, buildings, bridges and loving the work.

Something else was building, which we will never know about, nor understand, and I hate it for taking my Good Friend, our brother. Randy left behind many friends and memories, and we will always be haunted by "If I had's" or "what ifs."

There must be some allergies in the air as I feel him near me always, now. I know Randy would have liked to thank everyone for their friendship through all the years in our profession and maybe that is what his last message was meant to be.

If I had one more chance to grasp his hand, I would remind him of the riches of his life, and the love that surrounded him. The most precious of moments are those spent together and the pain of loss is the greatest when there is no recourse. His message on the 25th is quite clear now. "*Good Bye Good Friends, I Love You.*"

So our lives go on in memory, Good Friend, good bye.

— Leif Erickson