

Putting Things in Perspective

Stories from a Hospice Volunteer: Michael

- By Tim Tosta

Michael's story is dedicated to my friends and colleagues in the criminal justice system. I am not drawing any conclusions or suggesting any lessons. All I know is that one individual emerged from the system, expecting something more of himself than his circumstances would have been expected to allow. And, he reached his goal.

On Monday, June 28, I received an e-mail transmittal from Eric, the Zen Hospice Project Volunteer Coordinator at Laguna Honda Hospital, informing us that Mike had passed that morning. He was 40 years old. He died of congestive heart failure. He had been with us since late September, 2009, and had undergone a metamorphosis. Whether he knew it or not, Mike flew away from us fully loved and respected, not only for the wonderful person that he was, but for the long and difficult journey that we had witnessed.

Mike told me shortly after his entry to the ward: "Around the age of two, my mother left me at a shopping mall in Nashville. She went away and never came back. I never really knew her. I have no recollection of my father. I guess she figured that if I was found by a decent family at the mall, I would stand a better chance than if I had remained with her."

Mike had come to us from San Francisco General Hospital where he had been taken from the streets, after suffering an episode occasioned by his failing heart. It was determined that Mike's heart could not survive surgery and arrangements were made for his transfer to the hospice ward. Upon arriving to the ward, he told us.

"My life has been surrounded by madness. I just try to shut it out. I'm not proud of this, but I've been in prison most of my life. I'm illiterate, can't read or write. I have an ex-wife and 3 kids, ages 16, 18 and 22, but I have been ordered to stay away from them."

In fact, no one had found Mike at the Nashville mall. He slipped in and out of various state administered foster care programs and, ultimately, at the age of 17 found himself in the federal penitentiary. Following his stint in Tennessee, he served time in federal facilities in Florida, Ohio and California. Along the way, he became addicted to heroin, which, on his occasional release, led to crimes that returned him to prison.



By the time of his release in San Francisco, Mike could do no better than live on the streets, supporting his drug habit and watching his ever deteriorating health. Despite his circumstances, he regularly reported to his parole officer, avoiding his return to prison.

Despite his past, Mike held a lofty goal for himself. Upon being admitted to hospice, Mike declared, "I don't want to be remembered as a criminal. I want to be remembered as...a nice guy. I want to be at peace with myself."

Upon arriving at C-2, Mike struggled to make a new home. It was difficult. Mike began in the ward by carving out "his space," something learned from his prison years. At about 6 feet tall, approaching 200 lbs, with a stocky build, defining his "territory" really wasn't an issue for Mike. In the early days, he often paraded around the ward shirtless. His body was covered with prison tattoos and scars suggesting that he had been on the receiving end of several sharp objects. In establishing his "territory," Mike frightened many residents.

But, creating a safe place was critical to Mike. He once told me, "You know what it's like to sleep in prison? When your cell mate, for almost nothing, can be "convinced" to do you in? You start to sleep really differently. Like, with one eye open."

Over time, and with some counseling, Mike began to understand that there was no risk posed to him at the ward. Surrounded each and every day with volunteers who moved from wary to caring in very short order, Mike was supported in his quest to become a "nice guy." At first, Mike was aloof in his interactions with other residents. However, he soon made friends with Jeff, an acerbic wisecracker, who also had spent considerable time behind bars. Jeff was at the end stage of colon cancer, making important human connections and attempting to hide his considerable pain.

Mike began sharing his "penitentiary cuisine" with the residents. Mike told us how with a hot plate and Spartan ingredients, he could concoct a wide variety of dishes. One of his early favorites was pickled hard boiled eggs, which consisted of shelled hard boiled eggs being placed in a jar of jalapeños peppers for a day or so, until they turned a light green/blue grayish hue.

He began by "selling" his product to volunteers and residents in order to buy more food stuff for other meals. Soon, he learned that selling in the ward ran afoul of our culture. He was surprised to find that people would just give him the food if he cooked and shared it with others.

Over the months of his stay, Mike moved from sharing food to simply sharing his presence, engaging residents in conversation and becoming the "watch dog" for those most vulnerable. He befriended Maria, a Filipina in her 70's and a devout Christian. Maria introduced Mike to bible study. Mike would attempt memorize what Maria read. He would sit quietly with Maria as she painted water colors.

As he recovered his strength and energy through a program of regular meals, a clean bed and good hygiene, Mike considered leaving the ward. He started working with the Social Services Department to secure a small apartment of his own.

When able, Mike would visit his parole officer, go to movies (accompanied by Hospice volunteers), and make runs to the grocery store for his cooking supplies.

As Mike felt the growing respect for him in the community, his kindness blossomed. He found a way of making his own "rounds" by checking in with individuals to see how they were doing.

As Mike opened up to volunteers and other residents, he began to find acceptance and caring coming his way for the first time in his life. His entire countenance softened. There was less of an edge. If Mike was a bear, he was morphing toward the teddy type. He began to express his feelings and articulate his care for others. Mike was visibly shaken when Jeff unexpectedly passed. He said, "I have to be really careful now about who I make friends with. You get close to someone here and then you have to watch them die. It's too much!"

As Mike felt the growing respect for him in the community, his kindness blossomed. He found a way of making his own "rounds" by checking in with individuals to see how they were doing. Eventually, an apartment was located for Mike. He, a social worker and one of the volunteers traveled by bus to visit it. Mike was excited by the prospect of being on his own and contemplated having guests to his new home. Perhaps, even a woman friend. But, above all, he looked forward to cooking his first meal there...macaroni and cheese.

In his last days at C-2, it seemed that Mike was beginning to appreciate how much love surrounded him and how well he functioned there. While he looked forward to the move, he also knew he would be losing a community that appreciated him and saw him the way he had wished to be seen. Mike was scheduled to move to his apartment on Tuesday, June 29. By late Sunday, all of his belongings had been organized and packed for his departure. On Monday morning he had breakfast and, somewhat uncharacteristically, decided to take a nap. He died in his sleep.

We all knew that Mike was vulnerable to his failing heart. But no one had expected his passing so soon. E-mails flowed around the volunteer community expressing love toward him and great sorrow at this sudden passing.

A volunteer remarked that a few months ago, he had taken Mike to the movie theatre to see Avatar. He reported that Mike had said, "You know, every action movie, in the end, also is really just a love story." And so it was for Mike, his action movie in the end was a love story. And, he died, remembered for his kindness.

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