

Kevin M. Killingbeck

Well, now it's time to reflect on an usually furry gift from God known to most of us simply as "Kevin"

To begin at the beginning, we need to go back to 1954.

Now 1954 was the year...

- Our Supreme Court ruled segregation by race violated the 14th amendment;
- Senator Joseph McCarthy increased his witch hunting activities, but only to finally be censured by his colleagues in the Senate;
- Billy Graham held huge evangelistic meetings in the U.S. and Europe;
- Dr. Salk started inoculating schoolchildren with his polio vaccine;
- And Roger Bannister ran the first under-four-minute mile.

But the BIG news of 1954, at least in the Michigan City home of Robert and Alice Killingbeck, was the birth of their third son, Kevin.

Robert (or "Bud," as most people called him) did a variety of jobs for the railroad, and Alice was a full-time home-maker – probably even more than full-time not long after Kevin's birth because Kevin was followed by three more children for a total of six: Ray, Dave, Kevin, Brian, Barry, and Kathy.

The family lived just north of La Porte in a big old fixer-upper that did not get very much "fixing up." I know many of us have heard Kevin describe the place as having innumerable critters underneath and not much in the way of plumbing, electricity, insulation or room above. The boys were always contending for the one bedroom assigned them that actually had heat.

On the other hand, their house was surrounded by a whole lot of empty country and that gave the five boys and their baby sister a lot of room to make their own fun. Said "fun" included rabbit hunting in the nearby woods; working on any-and-all things mechanical, especially cars; and (remember, we're talking about five big, strong boys) fighting. Somehow, the way Kevin told the story, he was always getting beat up because he was small..., or he was always getting beat up because he was big and stuck up for the little guy against multiple opponents.

If you're like me, you loved the man, but you took a lot of what he said with a grain of salt. I do know school – with the exception of auto shop – was not his friend. Kevin was smart, but his heart was outdoors or in the garage or on the racetrack.

From an early age, Kevin fell in love with speed. His mom, Alice, undoubtedly attributed more than one of her gray hairs to harrowing stories her boys would tell about out-running police officers. Kevin told me he once got his '68 Camaro up to 120 miles-per-hour and left a pursuing officer in the dust – and I do mean dust because they were on a dirt road at the time.

Happily, most of his racing activity was confined to the US 30 Dragstrip in Hobart. He loved dragsters and funny cars, and if I understood him right, he got about as much fun out of working on such speed machines as racing them. At the very least, he and his friend, Mike Sherer, co-owned a garage for a little while that specialized in making cars go faster than was sane (or street-legal).

We're pretty sure that's mostly what Kevin did after graduating from high school. But anybody who loves auto racing knows it's almost always a money pit – thrilling, but expensive.

And Bud had told his son that after high school, he was on his own. Kevin tried to live off garage earnings, but when that didn't work, in 1975 he decided to join the army. At one time or another, he's probably regaled everyone in this room with tales of his adventures as a master mechanic keeping a Huey UH-1 helicopter in fighting shape. Cracked rotors, forced landings, fuel line breaks – he handled them all and was honorably discharged in 1977.

Kevin worked at an Allis Chalmers plant for a while, building tractors. They recognized his mechanical intuition and trained him to be a true machinist. Sadly, the factory went out of business shortly after he finished that training, but he was able to score another machinist job with the Sullair Company making compressors.

Seeking better pay, he then went to TP Orthodontics and stayed there for 28 years, making and repairing incredibly precise machines that could crank out the teeth-straightening braces many of us bought for our kids instead of buying a home.

If I understand correctly, Kevin had a bit of a mixed reputation at TP. Some folks saw him as the most precise machinist in the place. But the level of precision he asked of himself was higher than many products really needed, and that extra level of precision came at the cost of slowing him down to what some called “Do Nothing” levels. Plus, as more-and-more of the manufacturing process grew dependent on computers, Kevin's old school skills were less-and-less needed. He grudgingly gave computers a try, but his heart wasn't really in it and the re-training didn't stick. He left TP and tried a few odd jobs, but never again found a workplace that truly “fit.”

As for homelife, Kevin's included marrying a nice Mormon young woman named Laurie Krieger in 1977. Kevin was then at the ripe old age of 22, and at the height of his powers as a machinist and mechanic. He was never more at home than when he was holding a wrench and wearing a greasy t-shirt. He was comfortable with engines and all kinds of macho things. But he was never really at home ...at home. And as for being comfortable with children? Not so much.

Kevin and Laurie had three kids: Melanie in 1978, Mandie in '79 and Joe in '81. They knew dad loved them, but it was also pretty clear that he had no idea what to do with them. After Kevin and Laurie divorced in 1982, the kids would spend weekends and a lot of holidays with dad. In an effort to share the things he loved, Kevin would take them to events like tractor shows, and talk for hours about the superior features of an Allis Chalmers one-ninety XT tractor vs a John Deere model 4020. He was always a little baffled when the kids weren't totally fascinated.

In the mid 1980's, Kevin gave marriage a second shot, teaming up with Anita. By then he'd learned a thing or two, and helped Anita raise her two kids. He started cheering at softball and baseball games, took the kids out for ice cream and bicycle rides. In the process, he even discovered he loved bike riding and would think nothing of going on a 50-mile outing.

Truth to tell, though, Kevin never got over being flummoxed by Mandie, the one “girly girl” among the five kids in his orbit. Her gentle, artistic personality clashed with his macho, fix it with a hammer and duct tape style. Though for all their lack of communication, I can tell you he was shattered when Mandie passed away a while back.

The marriage with Anita lasted some 18 years. Kevin could be stormy, kind of a tyrant, but never abusive, and always strove to be a good provider.

During those years, a habit he'd always had began to accelerate: volunteering. He built houses with Habitat for Humanity, rang a collection bell for the Salvation Army, and helped with the outreach and property programs of whatever church he was a part of.

Around age 40, Kevin started to have some serious health problems: diabetes, headaches, asthma, digestive issues. He was used to being one of the strongest men in the room, but that slowly became less-and-less true over the years.

Even more wind went out of his sails during a brief, later-in-life marriage to Christine. The union only lasted eight months, but in that time Christine managed to get them horribly in debt. I didn't know this, but up until the time she bankrupted them, Kevin had been quite frugal: always paying cash, proud to never use credit (much less charity). Suddenly he had first one mortgage, then two.

Everybody who loved him got used to his depressing ability (possibly brought on by honest-to-goodness clinical depression) to find the cloud in any silver lining, but Kevin really did know more than a share of hard knocks.

That said, we here at First Christian were privileged to also witness his eagerness to volunteer, to do what he could. I don't know if he got MORE gentle and loving as he grew older, I suspect he always had that side. But he certainly showed it here. For instance, he was my partner for a decade or so in working the late shift when we hosted the homeless shelter. And several of our guys were proud to take him to Salvation Army bell-ringing gigs or Habitat work when he could no longer drive.

Of course, lately we also had to join forces to get him to various doctors who would work on his failing health, or to lawyers and judges trying to get him on the disability that – it seemed to us – he was so obviously qualified for.

I know Kevin loved to drive and chafed at not being able to, but I give him props for being exceedingly grateful whenever anybody took him somewhere. In fact, for all his growing melancholy over how life had turned out and his frustration with becoming progressively weaker, we experienced him as a truly gentle-man; a man of deep faith who loved his family (albeit, imperfectly), his friends, his country, his church and his God – a God into whose hands Kevin, in the end, was more than ready to go.

Well, it was a hard life, that life, but a good one. If I haven't done it justice – or messed parts up entirely – I hope you'll take advantage of opportunities like the luncheon after this service to set the record straight, or at least share your memories as a way of continuing to enjoy the gift that was (and is) Kevin Killingbeck.

For now, though, ...it's time to move on. I've done a lot of thinking – and asked some of you – about what Kevin might want to tell us at this time.

One thing I'm positive he'd say is: Thank you. Thanks to Mickey and Chris and all the guys who chauffeured me to appointments and church and WalMart.

Thank you, Linda, my late-in-life friend: one of my fondest memories is just sitting in the car with you, watching geese.

Thanks to the many people like Terry who loved me and put up with my stories – even the stories tinged by the dark cloud I seemed to have been perpetually under.

Thanks to my church family for loving me. And thanks as well to my biological family in all our messy glory. We loved, we fought, and I'm sorry for the role I played in pushing us apart, but thank you for BEING my family.

Kevin said “Thank you” more and more frequently these last few years; I’m sure he’d say it now.

I also suspect he’d have at least a little advice for us, mainly because I’ve learned that, back in the day, he’d proudly give an opinion on the right way to do a job; and then, later, he’d be equally proud to tell you how you did that job wrong.

So Kevin was no stranger to giving advice. But since we’re not working on a job, maybe he’d advise us to enjoy a good garage sale because you can never have too many hammers if the price is right. (That is wisdom I’ll take with a grain of salt).

He might tell us to vigilantly check out our homes and fix whatever’s wrong. If you’ve been to his house, you know this is something he often told himself – though, admittedly, ACTING on his own advice was sporadic at best.

So, again: maybe a grain of salt.

More seriously, Kevin might admonish us to take care of each other. He grew increasingly sentimental about the people in this room and those we represent; and increasingly sad about some of the bridges that had been burned. He’d want us all to be good to one another, and to forgive one another when necessary (maybe better than he did).

And then there’s one other thing. We who joined him for Bible study this last decade or so got to see something of Kevin’s faith and spiritual journey. That’s why I’m confident he would encourage us ALL to keep this day in perspective.

Tears are sacred and appropriate, of course, but he would remind us: “I had a lot of years of GOOD health. When the end came, it was painful, but I’m so glad it’s over and I thank God I wasn’t forced to linger any longer. Picture me now,” Kevin might say, “meeting old friends and family members (my hard-working father; my mother – the most loving woman I’ve even known; Grandma Clarke; and – of course – Mandie).

“Imagine me now, stronger than ever, looking around for a job to do and maybe even a fast car to drive (at any speed on a heavenly dragstrip, and at heavenly mandated speed limits everywhere else, ...of course). Maybe I’ll even find some heavenly equipment that could use a good machinist.

“I now get to join the ‘Great Cloud of Witnesses,’ cheering you on, rooting for you to do the right thing bravely and well. Love God, love God’s children, and love God’s church (and if either God’s children or God’s church act a little crazy now and then, know that God, who is always faithful, would tell you to love them anyway).

“And when it comes time for YOU to die, as it has for me, be sure of this Easter truth: death is not the end of our story. Thanks to the love I’ve experienced in Jesus Christ, death is just the start of a whole new chapter.”

... Well, that’s more flowery and wordy that Kevin would be, but I think it’s SOMETHING like what he’d tell us. At the very least, I know he’d like it if we ended this time of remembrance by revisiting the “table of memory,” a table that was a part of every worship service Kevin attended here. We’re going to prepare for communion by singing one of Kevin’s favorite hymns. His heart really belong to ‘60’s and ‘70’s rock, but hymn-wise, he did actually tell me once: he loved # 546, “Amazing Grace.” So, turn to 546, and let’s sing....

(All sing, followed by communion)