

From This Corner

A BEACH BUM REMEMBERED

Larry Baird

Every summer for years Brenda and I, and our boys when they were children, have headed for Niantic, Connecticut to spend a week or more at the beach. “Our beach” is McCook Park, a small village beach on the far end of Long Island Sound, on the Connecticut shore.

Almost thirty years ago we met a man there who greeted us and with whom we became friends. The boys affectionately came to know him as “The Beach Bum,” a moniker he readily accepted as he wore a yellow and white cap proudly owning the title. Among other things, he taught us how to deal with the periodic jellyfish that would present themselves as obstacles to enjoying the water. The Beach Bum was in actuality Frank Eagen, a retiree from the office world of New York City who had found his way to Niantic for a peaceful retirement. His daily life in retirement consisted of arriving early at the beach to set up his chair, raise his umbrella, read the New York Times, and swim the length of the beach for exercise. The rest of the time he spent relating to people in a welcoming, congenial, unobtrusive and genteel way. For many of those years he also was the volunteer who swept sand off the walks and cleaned the public restrooms. When he was not at the beach he participated in and was an integral part of the parish of St. Agnes Catholic Church. My in-laws, who often visit Niantic during other seasons, have reported to us that Frank presided at the beach even during “less than beach weather.” Indeed, Frank was in love with McCook beach, and the with all those people who were also attracted to its beauty and atmosphere.

This year when Brenda and I arrived we noted that Frank’s car was not in its usual spot. We commented that his 2007 Christmas card had consisted of only of his signature rather than the usual excited anticipatory remark that he would be awaiting our annual visit. It took Brenda and me two days to ask about him largely because neither of us really wanted to know why his spot was vacant. It turns out that Frank died in early January. When told of the news I still remember the lump in my throat and the tears I fought back. I know Brenda had a similar response. Our now adult sons have told us that when they heard that the Beach Bum was gone, they too spent time in reflection of Frank’s character and contribution to our lives. Never a year passed when he or they did not ask about each other’s welfare.

As you might expect, Frank was appreciated not just by the family from Western New York who visited once a year. After Frank's death a plaque was placed on the beach wall next to where he daily descended the short stairs to his permanent spot on the sand. They also permanently retired his Number 001 beach pass.

Revelation 14:3, a Scripture passage often used at funeral and memorial services certainly applies to the life of Frank Eagen. It says: "Write this down: Blessed are those who die in the Lord ... they are blessed indeed, for they will rest from all their toils and trials; for their good deeds follow them."

Frank's life is a reminder that simple kindness, self-giving, servant hood, and hospitality are life enriching and enhancing attributes. None of us have to do big things to be important in God's economy.