

Jim Cuddy

From: Jim Cuddy
Sent: Thursday, December 09, 2010 4:17PM
To:

Subject: Jerry Kelley

Gerard "Jerry" Kelley, age 66, passed away Sunday at his home in Framingham. In his obituary, published in Tuesday's edition of the Metrowest Daily News, Jerry's life milestones were described as being a college graduate, serving as an Army Officer in the Asian Theater during the Vietnam War, and being a coach, teacher and athletic director of a local high school. The thumbnail-size facial photograph that appeared with the print showed a gray-haired, broad-faced man of unquestionable Gaelic descent (in other words, the map of Ireland stamped on his face).

What was not included in the printed words was the fact that Jerry had lived at 58 Clinton Street for the past 21 years.

58 Clinton Street was the second building that the Housing Corporation purchased in 1986 and it was the first lodging house to be acquired by our organization. A nice building, we bought it back then to preserve and maintain the existing affordable housing stock for unaccompanied single adults.

I got to know Jerry well over the 20 years. Early on, when he moved to the building, we fell into a conversation where he revealed to me that he knew my dad and my stepfather because of his interest in, and connection to, athletics. He knew all about Providence College basketball. Over the years, I would run into him as he stopped by to pay his rent and say hi to Darlene. I was aware that he had a different career before he became a night watchman, but we never talked much about his past. I never asked him, nor did he ever volunteer information about how his life path had changed so dramatically that he wound up living in an affordable SRO and working as a security guard. I never thought it was my business. He was a good guy. We always had good conversations, and we found a way to connect that always linked our paths.

When Jerry's body was discovered in his room by the House Manager, she reached out to Darlene, who went right to the house on Sunday afternoon and also notified me, both by phone and email, because she knew of my link to Jerry and that I would want to hear the news from her. We caught up on Monday afternoon. She had just come back from Clinton Street where she met with some of Jerry's siblings, and was helping them negotiate the difficult passage. She gave me a picture, a snapshot of what had happened on Sunday and what had happened that morning. It would be tempting to try to share it in the way that Darlene shared her experience with me, but I'm afraid it would fall short. So let me simply describe to you what I heard from Darlene.

Our House Manager, Hope, had called Darlene on Sunday in a state close to hysteria. The house residents knew there was something wrong because, in Hope's words, "Every morning Jerry had a pot of coffee going in the kitchen for us, and there was no pot going Sunday morning." So, after a couple of them debated what to do, she went into the room after there was no answer to her knocking, and discovered the body. Darlene went right to the house, they called the Police to get them there, and she also called Charlene Foss, who is a counselor in charge of our CSPECH Program, to come over and talk to the residents. Darlene talked to me about how upset the residents were, how they were crying. She described how upset Ralph, one of our long-term residents featured in the Annual Report, was. She described a scene where one of the other residents of the house, a recent immigrant from El Salvador who works two minimum-wage jobs, was walking in the house with bags of groceries bawling her eyes out. She described how, when the Police arrived, there was one veteran officer and one rookie, who were absolutely amazed at how clean and

sparkling the house was, and how upset the residents of "a boarding house" would be that someone had died. Darlene told me how she and Charlene had worked to talk with the residents, how they had intervened with Hope and offered to help her arrange counseling at our Behavioral Health unit the next day, and how the whole house would be planning on attending Jerry's wake and funeral. We both agreed what a good guy he was, and that's how we left it.

So, why am I writing about this today? I'm writing about this because I want to use this to illustrate a couple of points and to tell you that, as a Board and staff, you should think about this tragedy, this passing of a life, as an illustration about who we are and what we've accomplished. In no specific order, this is what it means to me. We've succeeded in our mission. We preserved this house. When we started out on this road 25 years ago, we said that we were going to preserve and create housing. We were going to make it safe and affordable and attractive. We have. As we evolved and began to grow, we talked about the importance of the peer network and about how our whole model, whether it was a sober house or an affordable lodging house, needed to really work with a peer group support network, common kitchens, common living rooms, so that folks could get to know each other, support each other and create an internal community in the house. It happened in our first house. We've worked at doing this at every house we've ever purchased or in every building we've ever converted for housing. We feel proud of that. It enriches the quality of life. In our conversation, Darlene told me that she kept pushing Jerry about the fact that she could link him up with Framingham Housing, who would have an apartment for him. Jerry's answer was always quite simply "No, I want to stay at Clinton Street."

You can take pride in the fact that our House Management system, where we promote people, where we engage people and make them House Managers, works. Our resident House Manager, that one time was a client, went through some extremely difficult times. She is now an employee. She has achieved what we've talked about, that is, helping people achieve economic and social self-sufficiency. What better reflection?

We can take pride in the fact that Darlene has never lost her effectiveness or compassion over a 25-year history. She cares as much today as she did 25 years ago. We can take pride in the fact that we have employees like Darlene and Charlene who, on a Sunday afternoon, went right over to the house to meet with the residents. Jerry's passing is something for us to mourn, but it reflects lessons for us to rejoice in. I don't know what happened to Jerry, why he wound up at Clinton Street, why his life path changed. I don't really even want to know. What I do know is that Clinton Street provided him with a community that he felt a part of. The interconnected relationships of the house, in some very vital and basic way, sustained him. His connection to SMOC, his connection to Darlene, his connection to Hope, even his distant connection to me, was meaningful to him. It helped balance the meaning, purpose and structure over the last 20 years of his life. It's that image of residents coming out of their room in the morning, walking down to the kitchen expecting to smell the aroma of brewing coffee, that sticks in my mind.