

YEAR END, 2014
Wednesday, 12/31/14 Noon
A Somber Moment, A Quiet Reflection

Vincent Sia, age 60, is being buried as I write this. The husband of Heidi Sia, Director of SMOC's Medway Family Shelter, Vincent endured years of poor health, including several heart attacks, before succumbing to the final one while walking their dog.

This marks the third time in the past 6 months that one of our Managers has lost their husband.

I only knew Vincent through Heidi's eyes and was well aware of his health struggles, yet his passing was both sudden and shocking. I attended the wake early last evening, held at their church, a prominent, simply crafted and elegant wooden structure in the center of Medway. I watched as Heidi and their two adult children received mourners and overheard her say, "Of course we would have it here (the church). This has been so much a part of our lives." I hugged Heidi, who has been with the agency since 1991, and said, "Whatever we can do, please let me know."

Searching for something a bit more personal, I added, "You know my father's name was Vincent." Thinking but not sharing that Heidi was exactly the same age as my mom when I stood with her during my dad's wake nearly 34 years earlier.

As I stepped away to allow for the next person, Heidi reached out to me and said, "Have you listened to the music? Vincent's friend is a classical guitarist. Isn't it beautiful?" Yes, it was. I stopped in the aisle a few feet from Heidi, shut off my interior babble and listened - aware of the wooden pews, the flow of people and the clear, clean lines of this house of worship. It was a perfect moment.

In November, I was honored to facilitate a dedication ceremony at Serenity House. The staff, residents and program graduates had gotten together to purchase a bench in memory of James

"Jimmy" Schwager, who had died, at age 46, after a short, excruciating battle with esophageal cancer.

Like Vincent, I only knew Jimmy through his wife's eyes. Jane Schwager has been a part of SMOC since 1996 and Director of Serenity House since 2000.

When Jerry and I arrived at Serenity for the ceremony, the bench was cloaked under a blue tarp, fastened down with flagstones, and situated adjacent to the facility's front door. When the staff greeted us at the door, I asked "Has Jane noticed? Is she here?" "No," they assured me. They had kept her distracted and sent her on a "rock fetching expedition" while they prepared for the ceremony.

In deference to the damp, biting chill that descended on that late afternoon, we kept the outdoor ceremony brief. I don't recall with specificity the words I delivered, only that I focused my remarks on the bench as a place for peace, reflection, rest and thought. The simple act of sitting as a willful act of stepping out of the bustle of our daily lives. I remember delivering these words in a soft cadence. The striking image that remains with me is the look on Jane's face sitting on "Jimmy's" bench, nestled in a human nest of staff, residents and fellow members of the recovery community.

I still look down daily from my office window at the Sunflower Garden that we dedicated to Moses on a sunny September afternoon. The flowers are long gone, exposing the bare brown earth. I spot the plaque affixed to the brick wall of the power plant behind the garden by Moses' widow, Tania, and her parents. Tania joined SMOC in 2001 after a stint in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, and became our Rental Assistance Program (RAP) Director in 2009. I think I will welcome spring when we can once again plant seeds in the earth.

I've had the privilege of watching Heidi, Jane and Tania encounter their respective life tragedies with grace and strength. In the winter, I observed Heidi draw strength from her community of faith and family. In the fall, I observed Jane draw strength from the recovery community, her co-workers and

the residents of the Serenity program. In the summer, I observed Tania draw strength from her family and friends.

This weekend, I will be spending time caring for my mother, something my wife and I have been focused on for the past few years. She's 92 now and frail, but able to live semi-independently with the help of two wonderful caretakers. Despite significant memory loss, she retains her wit and the ability to "bust my chops." I'm never sure whether watching her slowly fade away is a blessing or a curse. Perhaps it is a bit of both. I remember my mother talking about her being sent away to a camp in Maine on a lake every summer from the time she was 5 years old by my cold and always distant grandmother. She told me once that she had this recurring nightmare of being launched from the shore, alone in a wooden rowboat, without oars, drifting into the mist, and not ever being able to find her way back. When she speaks of my dad, who died young, after an exceedingly long illness, she will say, "He was a great guy. He just drew a short straw in life."

I can easily imagine Heidi speaking those words about Vincent, Jane speaking of Jimmy in that manner, and Tania using those words to describe Moses.

Working with poor, disadvantaged and disabled people is always a challenging task, whether in the moment, for a brief duration or over a lifetime. It is a profession which requires strength and grace. There are many different paths to the stillpoint of life change. There are an equal number of different paths to maintaining the strength and grace required to reach that stillpoint.

Jim