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“THERE’S NOT ENOUGH TRIM TO HIDE THE HOLE LEFT IN OUR HEARTS”

Some fond memories of longtime PACA volunteer and good friend, Mark Chenail

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If you used to visit the PACA warehouse regularly a year or so ago, you likely noticed a very round fellow with big glasses rolling through the place in a wheelchair.

That was Mark Chenail.

As anyone who spent much time with Mark will tell you, that wheelchair could be quite misleading. Mark was one of those people who complicates our understanding of the word “disabled.” Despite having been confined to a wheelchair throughout most of his life—he contracted polio as a child—Mark was someone who seemed to be everywhere doing everything, and in fact I’ve not run into very many people from Champaign or Urbana who didn’t at least know him by sight, even if they didn’t know anything about who he actually was.

Speaking for myself, and even after a great deal of thought, I still can’t recall how or when I first met Mark. Like many others I’d seen him rolling around town as far back as the mid 1980s I think it was, but at that time I only knew of him as a local “personality” and then eventually someone to nod at or say hello to. It wasn’t until many years later that I met or spoke at any length with him, but by that time I felt like I already knew him. We seamlessly transitioned from knowing *of* one another to actually *knowing* each other, without any specific first point of contact.

But that’s very much how Mark was. It was difficult to be around him and not get to know him, and once you did know him, not to become his friend. PACA volunteer Dan Leasure recalls: “He had a flair for stories and tended to draw people in with his zest for life and nearly insatiable interest in learning, especially about Champaign County history.” Adding, “He accepted everyone and didn’t seem afraid of anything.”

Mark evinced this fearlessness in a variety of different ways, and as I’ve spoken to various people about him in order to write this story, Mark’s willingness to take on any task—no matter how big it was—seemed to form a key component of some of their favorite memories of him.

A friend of Mark’s, who posted on his Facebook page after learning of his death, wrote:

We were talking about the nasty snowstorm we were watching blowing outside, and Mark told me that when he was a little boy in New England he once strapped a board (or piece of cardboard—it’s an old story) on the front of his chair and tried to plow the sidewalk. The story had twists and turns, but the attempt was a complete failure; little Mark didn’t have anywhere near enough strength to move himself, the chair, AND snow.

I have a similar story of my own. When PACA was salvaging some things out of Lincoln Hall prior to their recent renovations, Mark was a regular visitor to the site. Up on the third floor in one of the classrooms there was a large stack of some heavy room dividers



