

PRESERVATION MATTERS

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PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

“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

Tom Garza

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



that no one else wanted but that Mark decided someone needed to take, so he began pulling them down one by one from the top of the stack, He'd then balance one of the roughly four foot by four foot pieces on the footrest of his wheelchair and take it to the elevator and from there down to the first floor in order to pile it on a rolling cart. By the time I caught up with him he had a whole stack of these things and was trying to rig some way of towing the cart full of dividers behind him. He fully intended to take off down the street with this unwieldy agglomeration until I promised him that I'd take it all in my truck instead.

Dan also recalls:

He always seemed able to recruit someone to lend him a hand with something that seemed logistically impossible for him to tackle and I don't think it ever occurred to him that he couldn't do it. He used to come with us on salvages for PACA. He insisted on helping, as much to help PACA as to check out a particular building he maybe hadn't seen yet. We would carry him in his chair up any number of stairs and he would grab a crowbar and get to work on the low stuff, hauling loads to the door stacked on his lap.

Such was Mark's determination to get things done, but Mark also tackled re-

strictive social conventions with the same zest as he did any other kind of problem, as something to work around or even ignore if necessary. A proudly "out" gay man, Mark was known to many people as "Wheelchair Mary," and in fact he even briefly had his own junkshop/antique store just off of Chester St. with the letters WCM on the front.

Mark mentioned to me once that he'd always found Champaign-Urbana to be a fairly open and gay-friendly place, and I don't know if his experience was unique in this respect or not. Nevertheless, although the way that the people in your community treat you is extremely important, it is the close relationships each of us has with family and friends that really define the way we all experience our personal struggles for recognition and self-acceptance, and it is clear that Mark understood this very well. Tim Outland, another Facebook friend of Mark's, says:

Mark was one of the first people I met when I moved to Champaign-Urbana during my freshman year of college and I was so grateful for his friendship and support. My parents had recently found I was gay and were none too happy about it. I felt very alone in the world, and had just moved away from my home and was living in a strange new city. . . . Mark quickly took me under his wing and became a true

mother-figure in my life. It was so liberating to be able to be who I was with no sense of shame, and to experience the acceptance and camaraderie that I wasn't sure if someone like me could ever have.

Now I realize that this may be an uncomfortable topic for some people, but I think that regardless of how you feel about it, you'll be bound to at least agree that it is a testament to Mark's indomitable spirit that he had the inner strength to overcome everything life had put in his way and still have enough left over to reach out and care for and support others. Quoting Dan again:

Mark's impact on those around him may have been limited to those lucky enough to have gotten to know him, but was significant to say the least. Not just because of what he accomplished despite his polio, but because of his insatiable curiosity and love of life. He loved his friends and his community and made it better for all of us in his own unique way.

In putting this piece together I found it far easier to come up with stories about Mark than to decide which ones to share with you, but there are definitely two I must tell before I let you go, because each in its own way captures some aspect of Mark's buoyant personality that I think is worth highlighting. Now I'll warn you, the first one I seriously have some doubts about because it seems too perfect to be true. I can't help but feel that this is either the result of editing over time, or else it's entirely made up and Mark just told it in order to make people laugh. But whether or no, it fits his personality so perfectly, that no story about Mark would be complete without it.

I'll quote Mark's friend Jon here:

While traveling with a friend to or from the city, Mark was involved in a car accident. Mark was thrown from the car into the ditch. When an officer arrived and saw Mark, he asked him if he was OK and Mark says yes. Then the officer asked him if he could walk and Mark says no.....

"Oh, my God!" screams the panicked officer. "We need a medic!" The



look on the officer's face was pure terror.

Mark starts to laugh and then explains to the officer, "I've never been able to walk!"

As the years passed and we heard the story it only got funnier. He was a GREAT storyteller. As long as you had the patience for the punch line. . . .

The second story is everything I loved about Mark wrapped up into just a few short lines, and it comes to us again by way of Mark's best friend and companion Jon Barnett. I think it's fitting to close with this one, so I'll conclude my portion of this tale by saying that Mark is someone I will miss regularly and often. We were involved in several big projects which I didn't even get around to mentioning here—we worked together on Champaign's 150th anniversary committee, we'd collaborated on creating a 3D computer map of the city circa

1910, and we had even discussed writing a book together at one point—but as interesting as that kind of thing may be, I mainly wanted to focus on the personal, human qualities of Mark that made him the special person he was. That's what we will all miss the most because Mark can't ever possibly be duplicated or replaced. The greatest tribute I think we can offer him is to learn from his example and understand that life's wonders and possibilities are endless, and that our own personal limitations—no matter how burdensome they may seem to us—are very small by comparison. There is so much to see, to do, to learn, to explore, and to enjoy, and Mark never let anything keep him from doing all of those things every day, and neither should we.

In closing, here's Jon again:

Whenever things didn't fit just right, or a measurement was just a little off,

Mark would say to me, "Don't worry, the trim will hide it!"

It became our joke and motto for just about anything that didn't go as planned.

On more than one occasion we would see an unusual character in Champaign and look at each other and smile because we knew what he was gonna say . . . "needs more trim!"

Mark touched many people's lives and gave much when often there wasn't much to give. Like the Christmas I told him about a friend who was struggling to provide presents to her two small children. Within the hour we were shopping and he spent over \$200 on clothes and toys for the kids and even got the mother a few things, too.

Mark is and will continue to be missed everyday. There's not enough trim to hide the hole left in our hearts.

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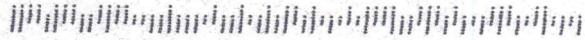
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