

THERE'S A PLACE CALLED KOKOMO*

Joe Bradley (June 30, 1952 - February 4, 2014)

Louis found Joe's body on the concrete floor of his room at Maggie's Place* late Monday afternoon. Louis had gone to Joe's room to do a "wellness check," knocked on his door and, getting no response had pushed the door open. . .

There is something comforting in the fact that Louis, the Turning Point* Director, an integral part of the Common Ground Resource Center team, and most essentially, a man of deep faith and conviction, was the person who found Joe.

"Jim, he was on the floor next to the bed. His mattress was tipped at an angle, up in the air off the spring. It looked like he was sleeping and had just rolled off of it." Louis

"Jim, you know you always tell us, to quote you, 'He didn't die in the weeds* or freeze to death next to a fuckin' dumpster. Joe died in his own bed in his own room.'" Susan

Joe's trajectory was one of an impending train wreck, you could feel it in his presence, you could sense it coming. You also knew that you were utterly powerless to stop it.

There is absolutely nothing fascinating, seductive or captivating watching it. There is only a sense of pervasive despair, the only existential question being how do you keep that despair at bay?

Joe Bradley, age 61, was a deeply troubled and tortured soul, a man who I am certain caused much pain and damage to a number of folks close to him, especially a family that had once deeply loved and cared about him. He was also a kind, affable, funny and thoughtful person.

Joe was a portly man in the tradition of Chester A. Arthur or William Howard Taft. I think he'd like that reference since he came from a political family, was sort of a political junkie

who, if had lived in a different time, would have apprenticed and aspired to become a Democratic political ward boss.

I first met Joe when he purchased the single-family house right next door to two of our group residences on Gordon Street in downtown Framingham, and moved in with his wife and their young daughter. He went out of his way to introduce his family to us, and let us know that he supported our mission and was glad to be our next door neighbor. Not only that, but he went out of his way to let the community know that SMOC was a good and responsible landlord and that he was proud that he, his wife and their young daughter were our next door neighbor.

How could I not like this guy. . .

Joe was appointed to the position of the Town's Veteran Agent sometime in the late 90's. Seemed like the perfect job for this former Marine and Viet Nam vet. He opened the doors of the Vets office, blew out the cobwebs and rolled out the welcome wagon, especially for his fellow vets who were part of our growing supportive housing system. Unfortunately, Joe didn't last long in the position. He was out. Paperwork? Attendance? Politics? - don't have a clue, but I know at the time that I saw Joe's departure presenting us with an opportunity, namely, making Joe part of the SMOC team.

Round 1

At the beginning of the new century, we hired Joe to be the Coordinator of the program that would later evolve into the Common Ground Resource Center. Joe got off to a great start out of the gate, but faded quickly before he even hit the straightaway. Just disappeared, stopped showing up for work.

"Joe, this ain't workin'."

He cops to his mental health struggles and we part on good terms.

Round 2

Joe keeps in touch. We talk about him coming back. I let him know that he'll be welcomed back when he feels up to it, and he

eventually tells us he's doing well and is ready to come back to work. So, in early 2007, he hops back on our bus as one of the SEE* caseworkers in our Waltham office. Once again, he gets off to a great start and once again, history repeats itself, and he hops off the bus before it makes even five quick stops and, in a certain parlance, never comes up for air. Tuesday I pulled his personnel file from Round 2 and wandered through it. This taken from his 6-month evaluation;

Employee - Joe Bradley

Job Title - Employment/Ed Specialist

Joe has successfully completed his 6-month review period. He has been an asset to the Waltham office as well as to the SEE Program . . . Joe has been a wonderful addition to our Economic Development Team.

Christina Cutting, Supervisor

As I dig through the paperwork, I come across these two emails.

Joe's email from 4/3/2008, 7:54 a.m.:

Dear Jim,

My apologies for not getting this to you sooner. I want to thank everyone at SMOC for the support and friendship extended to me over the past months. Due to personal medical reasons I am resigning my position as an employment/education specialist in the SEE Program as of the date of this email. I will also mail you a hard copy of this letter. I am looking forward to a full recovery and when I am ready to return to employment I hope to again become a member of the SMOC family. Thank you Jim for reaching out to me at this difficult time. I will keep in touch and if I can be of assistance in anyway feel free to contact me at any time. Please say hello to all my friends at SMOC for me.

Joe Bradley

My email in response, 4/3/2008, 8:06 a.m:

joe

keep in touch please

let me know if here is anything i can do

our door will always be open to you
jim

Round 3

Well, to be honest with you, Round 3 never happened. Joe makes sporadic attempts to keep in touch to let me know how he's doing and occasionally we talk. He's driving a cab for Tommy's Taxi at night, never hesitates to tell me that he's getting his act together, or that he's involved in an aftercare program, taking his meds, etc. I hear through the grapevine that his poor wife had finally thrown in the towel with him and wasn't sure where he was living. His buddy Marcos, a man of great understanding who started with SMOC as a Case Worker after a career change, learned the craft of therapy and becomes a very good one, always stops by to advocate for him. My response is always the same. "Just have him come in and see me."

Instead, I see him. I see him alright - on a mid-August day last summer as I'm strolling from my office down to the Common Ground. And there he is, sitting at one of the open desks in front of a computer screen, in the library/lounge space between the Opportunity Center and the Common Ground Resource Center. I greet him like the long lost friend that he is, and soon learn that he's now a client. After sleeping rough for a few nights, he'd had the good sense to "come in" and was staying at the Turning Point. I commended him and then, in our typical, interactive fashion, began to bust his chops about guys our age thinking we could still bivouac out in the bush.

At first glance, same old likeable Joe, then I noticed a new wrinkle. He's got that semi-glazed glint in his eyes, the one that always scares the living shit out of me when I notice it in someone. So, I do what I always do when I encounter that special look.

I simply ignore it.

I appoint myself as Joe's coach, determined to get him back on the team.

My efforts are a work in progress. I make it a point to engage him on a daily basis since he's hanging out every day at the computer at the Common Ground.

"Joe, did you get your meds, I spoke with BHS, I think you're all set for the med eval. Make sure you take them, man."

"Joe, you think you might be ready to go back to work and earn a few bucks while you're waiting for the Disability to kick in? You know, Ready, Willing and Able might be a perfect fit for you, man. I'm gonna hook you up with RWA, have David D. see you. You know he'll set you up."

"Joe, how long can you like really last at the Turning Point? You want to be sleeping in a dorm? You know, you need your own room, man. A man of your age - the best thing for you, dude. What do you think about a room at Maggie's Place? We've got to get you out of the dormitory. We'll figure out the rent. I know you can do it. You'll feel a hell of a lot better about yourself, man."

"Joe, we're getting ready to open a Drop-In Center down the street, you know, in the back of the Salvation Army building where their Thrift Store used to be. We're going to call it 'The Place.' Man, you would be perfect as one of the engagement staff down there working the front desk. Let's start off slow, maybe 3-4 hours a day, man, get you some money. This will help you get back on your feet. What do you think?"

"Joe, there's a little issue with your CORI. I know we can help you clear it up. How about if you start at The Place as a volunteer. It will work out perfect. As soon as the CORI issue is cleared, we'll put you on the RWA payroll. What do you think, man?"

Joe and I would joke, talk about different stuff. He'd ask me about my family without volunteering much information about where he was at with his. I didn't push. I just kept encouraging him. After all, he was going to be back on the team, he'd start off on the bench in a limited role, but I knew

if we kept at it together, he'd be getting a lot of playing time.

And so that's what happens. We opened "The Place" the day before Thanksgiving and there's Joe sitting at the front desk right next to the entrance.

Unfortunately, he doesn't make it past the second week. He's added a new weapon to his self-destructive arsenal - booze-induced rants and performances.

OK, so he's not ready for the varsity. Let's put him on the JV.

"Joe, let's try this again, man. How about if we have you sitting at the engagement desk either at the Common Ground or the Opportunity Center? A couple of hours a day, it'll be in our building, less pressure, you won't feel out on your own and isolated. Be a really good fit. You've got the skills, man. You've got that certain patina. People like you. You'll be a great part of the team here."

This time he simply reverts to the old Joe and pulls a disappearing act. "Attaboy" sessions are replaced by wellness checks. "Please keep an eye on him" is my exhortation to Brian, Louis, David D. and Susan. It's like I hear that train comin' around the bend. It's not a slow train either*. It's a big old freight train rumbling toward oblivion.

This is my favorite or, perhaps, my most poignant memory of Joe.

In mid-2009, we scheduled an Open House for the main building at Gordon Street. The building had been destroyed by fire a year earlier (no one hurt thank God). The building had nearly burned to the ground. It took us a year to rebuild it. It was during The Troubles*, so the day before the Open House, Jerry and I decide to check the place out. On the ride over I say to him, "Hey, let's stop by and visit Joe and see if he's home." So we park in front of our building. I walk up to Joe's door and ring the bell. There's no answer. So Jerry and I go through our building, wandering around, admiring how nice it looks and what a stark, welcoming contrast it was to the original.

A slight digression here. This was the fifth building we ever bought. We've owned the property since 1988, purchased from a scumbag landlord who rented to undocumented folks who weren't in the position to ask him to heat the place. I've always been glad we got him to sell it to us. A couple of years later we converted the rather large concrete garage located in the rear of the property into a second, smaller residence that, at the time, we were leasing to Advocates for a group home.

So, Jerry and I wound up on the third floor and, for some reason, step out onto the exterior egress. We gazed down to Joe's yard and, lo and behold, he's sitting behind the wheel of a parked car in his driveway. It's mid-afternoon, the front window of the car Joe's sitting in is rolled down, Beach Boys tunes are blaring from the car stereo. He's wearing a bathrobe. Oblivious. At first, I shout down to him, then think better of it. So, Jerry and I retreat inside, giggling.

The next day, the Open House goes great although Joe does not stop by. As the months and years roll along, we occasionally riff on the scene that we encountered that day when Joe wanders into our conversation. I suppose it's the way that many of us learn to handle the psychic burdens of situations that feel like failures.

One day soon, when the warmth returns and the green canopy once again covers the ribbon-shaped park across the street from our building, I'm going to walk out of my office, go down the stairs and out the front door and cross the street to the park. I'll be carrying a lawn chair with me. You know, one of the canvasback ones that you often see in an L.L. Bean catalog. I'll set the chair down and sit down with a bottle of water and stare at the front facing profile of our building. It's a favorite visceral experience for me, as it always reminds me of one of my favorite Edward Hopper paintings (Early Sunday Morning c.1930). I'll wait for Joe to drive by. Sooner or later, I know he will, behind the wheel of his yellow and purple hack. He'll be wearing his favorite herringbone tweed cap, his eyes cloaked behind Ray-Bans. When he sees me, he'll slow down to a crawl, reach across the leatherette front bench seat of his ride, grab the duffel bag that he's stuffed all of his demons,

sorrows and furies in, and toss it out the window into my lap. Then he'll stomp on the accelerator and rocket down Howard Street toward the Sal Army building. I'll see his outstretched arm giving me the thumbs-up sign as he disappears into the mist, with Mike Love's vocals, backed by Carl Wilson and Al Jardine's harmonies soaring above the pulsating heavy bass wafting in the air of his hack's wake.

"There's a place called Kokomo. That's where you wanna go to get away from it all.*"

Jim Cuddy
February 4, 2014

NOTES:

*Kokomo. The Beach Boys 1988, released as a single. Written by John Phillips, Scott McKenzie, Mike Love and Terry Melcher.

*Maggie's Place. First Step Housing for people leaving the Turning Point Shelter, named in honor of Margaret Davitt, former Turning Point Director and 47-year employee of the agency.

*Turning Point. A single adult shelter located in Framingham.

*SEE. The acronym for SMOC Employment Enterprises, a job program for individuals with chronic mental health issues and a precursor to our current IPS Program.

*The concept loosely lifted from Bob Dylan's "Saved".

*The Troubles. My terminology that references the period from 2005-2010 when the Federal lawsuit we filed against the Town of Framingham was settled in our favor.

*Lyric from "Kokomo".