

He
Was
There
All
the
Time

N I C K H O F F M A N


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A Night to Remember

A lot of people have been involved in my life, not least of them my Dad, Kenneth D. Hoffman.

He made two decisions that profoundly impacted me. The first was to marry and mate with my mother. The second was to divorce her.

While many American families were tuned in to “Lassie,” “The Ed Sullivan Show” or “Bonanza” on the evening of Sunday, Oct. 22, 1961, Dad and Mom were welcoming me into the world at DuBois Hospital. I tipped the scales at 8 pounds, 10 ounces.

Dr. Nicholas Lorenzo delivered me and was the first person to leave his mark on me – a scar on my left cheek from his forceps.

He is also the source of my second middle name, preceded by Kenneth - after Dad - and Albert, my mother’s father, followed by the family surname.

Kenneth Albert Nicholas Hoffman; Nick, for short.

Dad and I share the same first name as his father. Since we all lived in the same house, there had to be a way to distinguish us. My Grandmother called her husband Papa and her son “Duane,” his middle name. My ears perked up and I wagged my tail when someone called “Nick!” So much for a Kenneth Conundrum.

That second big decision occurred in 1972. Since

they were married on Friday the 13th in February 1959 and had been married for 13 years when they split up, those suffering from Triskaidekaphobia would say it was a numbers thing.

The actual reasons were more substantive but in any event, it was a life-altering decision for all of us.

I didn't and couldn't understand it then, but years later I began to appreciate an "unseen hand" and an intricate chain of events that not only changed Dad's life but ended up saving mine.

Forty years after that night in the kitchen, I shared that realization in a column in late summer 2012.

It was an August night in 1972, the 10th I think. I was two months shy of my 11th birthday as the family gathered in the kitchen of our home.

Dad was there to say good-bye. He and Mom were getting divorced and he was leaving.

Where are you going? He didn't know.

Can I go with you? No, son, you can't.

So many questions; so few answers.

He got a ride to the Ohio border, went to Michigan and eventually hitched a ride from a man named Paul Hoover. His trail stopped in Denver, Colo. At age 34, Dad was starting from scratch.

He got a job at a tire factory, worked selling insurance and labored at a steel foundry and a convenience store before he finally latched onto a job with United Parcel Service, where he worked for a quarter century and rose into the regional echelon of corporate communications before he retired.

He's made his share of return trips to Pennsylvania, including sojourns to bury his grandfather and his father and mother. I've spent a couple weeks with him nearly

every summer but I haven't spent more than a month of any calendar year with my Dad in 40 years.

I know, though, that no father and son are closer than we are.

We enriched the shareholders of AT&T with our marathon phone conversations and did our part to keep the U.S. Postal Service in business.

This year will be extra special because it marks the 20th anniversary of my stint in Norton, Kan., at Valley Hope drug addiction and alcohol rehabilitation center. Dad and I have only missed a return trip to Norton once since our first visit in 1992.

If Paul Hoover hadn't picked Dad up he wouldn't have ended up in Denver. If he hadn't ended up in Denver, he wouldn't have gone to work for UPS. If he hadn't gone to work for UPS, he wouldn't have moved to Omaha. And if he hadn't moved to Omaha . . . that's the rest of the story.

I was arrested for DUI - my second offense - in February 1992. My blood alcohol was a lofty 0.278 percent, about 3 1/2 times today's legal limit. Every facet of my life was out of control and the trajectory of decline was accelerating. I lived to drink; everything else was secondary.

Luckily, I was eligible for treatment rather than a 30-day stay in the Jefferson County jail. I asked Dad to find out what treatment centers were located in Omaha. I wanted him, if at all possible, to be part of my last stab to turn my life around.

He called a hotline number. I don't know how many people staffed the line that day or how many lines were ringing when Dad called but the lady who answered told him what was available. And then she told him something more.

Her son served in the military in Europe. He came home

with drug and alcohol problems. He went to a place called Valley Hope in Norton, Kan., she said, and it saved his life.

Dad contacted Valley Hope, which is one of the top 10 treatment centers in the U.S. I gave the information to the probation officers and District Attorney's staff and, with their blessing and that of DuBois psychologist Bill Allenbaugh and Judge William Henry, I was on my way to Kansas.

If Dad hadn't called that day at exactly the time when he did; if anyone but her had answered; if we never heard of Valley Hope . . . But he did and she did and we did.

On Monday, Sept. 21, 1992, after I checked in, Dad and I went to the chapel at Valley Hope, knelt, wept and begged God for a miracle. He said yes. Today, through the grace of God, I am sober and have been for nearly 20 years. (27 and counting as this book is written.)

I'm so looking forward to this year's trip. The plane ticket's bought and paid for. Valley Hope knows I'm coming and I'll be making a reservation at the Brooks Motel at the corner of routes 36 and 183, where we've spent a few nights, including Sept. 6, 1995, watching Baltimore's Cal Ripken Jr. eclipse Lou Gehrig's record of consecutive baseball games played.

Ironically, this year includes a trip to Denver, after our stop in Norton, to play golf with some of our buddies from Omaha.

Dad started over when he was 34; I was 31 when my turn came. Both involved a trip "out West," one that we'll share in its entirety this year.

Who could imagine, let alone fathom, that the darkest days of our lives would be stitched together so meticulously, so miraculously?

Rod Stewart recorded the song "Faith of the Heart" as the title song of the 1998 movie, "Patch Adams," starring Robin Williams. Some of the lyrics go like this:

*I know the wind's so cold,
I've seen the darkest days.
But now the winds I feel,
Are only winds of change.
I've been through the fire,
And I've been through the rain,
But I'll be fine.*

*That tune will echo in my head as Dad and I head west
this year ... together.*



Collision Course

I was failing my family, my friends, my job and everything that mattered, or should matter, in a person's life.

It was 1992 and my cup was running over ... with booze.

By the end of that year, my cup would be running over with a far more intoxicating brew, one of love and compassion and redemption. Between the two extremes lay a long and winding road.

I was in trouble at work, either from showing up less than able to work, or not showing up at all. I'd been encouraged to get my act together ... and told in no uncertain terms that I was expendable.

On more than one occasion, I had to hold a mug of beer with both of my shaking hands to get it to my lips.

One night during those dark years, I had a dream that featured a calm but firm voice, "I made you for better than this." That was it; no lightning, no earthquake, no angels swirling around my bed. I kept drinking, ... but I couldn't shake that dream or those words.

My season of reckoning began on a Saturday night. Feb. 1, 1992. As usual on weekends in those days, I embarked on a daylong binge, fell asleep at a bar and capped things off by getting behind the wheel in a

semiconscious haze. This time wasn't going to end "as usual," however.

I rear-ended a car on the way home. No damage, no injuries. I vaguely remember the driver getting in my face, but I left the scene, drove home and went to bed, content that I'd skated by again.

Then the police showed up, arrested and handcuffed me and took me to the station. My blood alcohol content was 0.278 percent – 3 ½ times the legal limit. No one gets to that level of intoxication without drinking regularly and heavily.

I lashed out, blaming anyone and everyone I could think of. Except me.

"They're messing with the wrong guy," I screamed when I returned home. "They'll pay dearly for this!"

I hired an attorney and launched an all-out assault on this travesty of justice. While there were some legitimate questions about the process that resulted in my arrest, District Justice Bernard "Tink" Hetrick found enough evidence to send the matter to the county court.

This was my second DUI offense, the first having come in 1987. If I was found guilty this time, I'd be looking at 30 days in jail, thousands of dollars in fines and costs, losing my driver's license for a year and, probably, my job.

I invested several thousand dollars to fight the charges. When the meter is running, the wheels of justice seem to grind to a halt. Legal briefs, answers, motions, more briefs.

A few months later, I called my attorney, Jeff Gordon, to get an update on the case. That's when lightning flashed.

"Nick, do you have a problem?" he asked.

Blindsided by the question and with my deflector shields down, my answer was brief and honest. "Yes," I said.

District Attorney Mark Wallisch, Chief Probation Officer Larry Straitiff and the prosecuting officer had agreed to offer me a plea agreement that would substitute a 30-day inpatient alcohol rehabilitation program for the jail term. I asked Jeff to find out if the offer was still on the table. It was. I took it.

I entered my plea before Judge William L. Henry in mid-July. But the madness didn't stop. I kept drinking, every night. My world revolved around my drinking time. Nothing could or would interfere.

During that spring, I had moved in with Nan at Dad's urging.

Nan had a franchise with God and Jesus Christ; together they made a business of salvaging lost souls. I was to become one of their projects.

But not just yet.

Unable to imagine or endure life without liquor, I tried to drink it all before I stood before Judge Henry again.

Despondent and frightened, I entertained unimaginable thoughts of killing myself and made one less than enthusiastic attempt to do so. A very good friend brought me back from the edge and told me to shape up.

I was slowly coming to realize how much trouble I was really in and how much help I needed. I wanted Dad to be a part of whatever lay ahead.

That's when he made the call to the referral line and we learned about Valley Hope in Norton, Kan.

Would the court system allow me to travel, unescorted, halfway across the country? Maybe not, but we wouldn't know until we tried.

Psychologist Bill Allenbaugh did evaluations of DUI defendants at the time. I had to convince him that I was worth the risk. Our paths had crossed once before. I didn't remember him. But he remembered me.

Remember when I checked into the detox unit in 1986 when I thought I had a problem? Bill was called in to consult with the doctors. He interviewed me. He remembers the conversation better than I. He told me I didn't want anything to do with counseling or help. Bill made a mental note to himself, "I'll see him again."

"Again" was here.

Bill decided I was worth trying to save and Valley Hope seemed to be my last best hope. He and the others signed off and I was on my way to Kansas.

I was scheduled to appear before Judge Henry at 10:30 a.m. Wednesday, Sept. 16, 1992. After I finished work on the 15th, I headed for the bars one last time.

Near 2 a.m., I swallowed the last gulp of my last glass of Budweiser. Eight hours later, even though I couldn't have passed a breathalyzer test, I stood before Judge Henry, who agreed to the terms of the plea agreement, sentenced me to go to Kansas and wished me well.

He didn't notice but one of the probation officers recognized the aroma of booze about me. He told me that would be the last and only time he'd let it go.

I was about to enter completely uncharted territory. My life was hanging in the balance.