

Promise grows to friendship

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She was 89 years old, talked with a sweet voice that ended sentences with a light laugh, lived in a retirement hotel in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood and had a sister-in-law who lived in Oak Lawn.

On April 3, 1996, this was all I knew about Josephine Manney.

Oh yes, and this: She was the aunt of the Unabomber, Theodore J. Kaczynski, who was arrested that day in a remote mountain town in Montana, charged with killing three people and injuring 23 during an 18-year terror campaign.

At the time, I was a reporter for the Daily Southtown, and I wanted to learn much more from the Unabomber's aunt.

To persuade her and her sister-in-law to talk to me, I promised to not use their names. For more than five years, I kept my promise, and neither of their names has ever appeared in print in connection with their infamous nephew, until today.

Revealed troubled history

I learned what I needed from Miss Manney that day, and the next as well, as she opened up to me about what she recalled of her troubled nephew, telling me insightful stories that clearly illustrated the trouble that brewed in Theodore Kaczynski.

But over the next five years, I learned something I hadn't sought from Miss Manney: Friendship can grow when we least expect it.

It was surprising that I even met Josephine Manney.

I was a neighborhood reporter then, and it was just my luck that one of the towns I covered as part of my beat was Evergreen Park, where Kaczynski grew up.

On the day he was arrested, I quickly made a list of all the Kaczynskis in the southwest suburbs and started driving around knocking on doors, finding myself alternately just ahead or just behind a pack of TV, radio and newspaper reporters doing the same thing.

After several hours, it was the early evening, near deadline, but before giving up, I decided to try, for the fourth and last time, the one home where no one had answered the door earlier.

This time, an elderly woman dressed in sweats speckled with white paint came to the door. She opened the door a crack just to hear what I wanted. I explained myself and she opened the door a little more to tell me with surprise in her voice: "I was at my daughter's house painting all day when I heard that on the radio and thought 'Kaczynski'? There were just too many coincidences. It has to be Ted."

She said she hadn't talked to any other reporters and told me what she remembered. But she confessed that her sister-in-law, Jo Manney, the sister of Theodore Kaczynski's father, had spent more time at the Kaczynskis' home in Evergreen Park when he was growing up.

I went back to the office and called Miss Manney at her home. She was reluctant at first, but after I explained the story I was working on and that we didn't have to use her name, she agreed to talk to me.

Between the two aunts, the story I wrote that first day sketched a good picture of Kaczynski as a boy nurtured as a liberal intellectual and outdoorsman since birth, but coddled by his mother and resentful when his younger brother was born. That all became part of the accepted lore of the Unabomber, but, for the time, it was insight that no one else had.

In that and subsequent stories we never revealed the aunts' names. At the time, it was simply a promise that needed to be kept, as well as an effort to keep the competition at bay. But, beginning with a second visit to Miss Manney, it also became a personal pledge.

For the second interview, the day after Kaczynski was arrested, I went to Miss Manney's home at the Lawrence House in Edgewater.

As I sat in the tearoom of the retirement hotel eating pastries with her talking about her nephew and his upbringing, it became clear to me that this was a special woman.

Coincidence of background

In bits and pieces at first, she sprinkled in details of her own life. Despite her age, at 89 her mind was as sharp as I'm sure it always was. I felt an immediate tie when I learned that she, like me, had been born in New York, moved to Pittsburgh as a child and settled in Chicago as an adult.

At one point, I dropped an inadvertent bombshell on her.

While asking about her nephew's personality, I asked her how Theodore Kaczynski had reacted to his father's suicide. Theodore Kaczynski Sr. had shot himself after being diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1990, something that Miss Manney wasn't aware of.

"What do you mean? My brother died of cancer," she said, worried.

Later, she checked with family and was told that, yes, her brother had killed himself, but the family had wanted her not to find out. We never talked about it again.

Through it all she demonstrated the pluck that might otherwise be absent in someone who had few family members left (all of her sisters and brothers had died) and whose independent spirit was challenged by not being able to get around like she used to.

Artful illustrations

When I would send her birthday or Christmas cards, Miss Manney always responded with a handwritten letter, decorated on the envelope and the letter itself with small, colored pencil drawings of a pastoral scene, an angel, or some other figure.

We talked or visited a couple times a year, and wrote back and forth only once or twice a year, but she always remembered me, always thanked me for being a friend and keeping her name a secret.

I called again during this past holiday week after Christmas to say hi and apologize for not sending a card this time. The clerk at the hotel said she wasn't there, that I should call a family member. I got a chill. I called her sister-in-law right away.

"Jo died over the Labor Day weekend," she told me.

Miss Manney's physical condition had deteriorated earlier in the year and she had to be moved to a nursing home.

Having left the hotel where she was the center of its social life for 18 years, and restricted even further by her physical problems, she decided she just didn't want to live any longer.

"She just stopped eating and that's what killed her," her sister-in-law told me.

When I went back and looked, the family had run a paid death notice for her in the Tribune. It included a list of her family, including "beloved aunt of Theodore, Kathleen and David," which was so true of her. As bothered as she was by her nephew's actions, she always hoped he would get the help he needed.

At the end of the list of family and friends, the obituary also noted that she was a "devoted friend of many."

I am proud to say I am one of those.

The Ted K Archive

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