

Kiwanis Konnections

I first joined the Peninsula Kiwanis Club early in 1969. Through the ensuing years, most of my closest friends in life also became members. Being a part of this organization seemed a natural progression for me. Many of us came from the 5 Towns area. I had been childhood friends with several of them, and business associates of others. In time, I came to regard some of the Kiwanians as near-brothers, almost a part of my family. Thus their inclusion in this anthology.

Not long after I became a Kiwanian, I convinced my buddies Richie Vicario and Donny Leone to join as well. For the next twelve years or so we had an awful lot of fun in Kiwanis.

As service club members, we worked hard to do good things in the community, but there was also plenty of time for laughs. And much of the hilarity revolved around those two “chidrooms”, Richie and Donny. I’ll give you a few typical examples, not necessarily in chronological order.

One night when we were meeting at the “Bounty Inn” in Hewlett, Richie and I were standing at the bar when Don Esopa came running into the building. “Hey, Rich,” he called. “Leone will be here any minute. Let me show you a trick you can pull on him.” With that he took out a big plastic funnel and inserted it beneath the belt on the front of his slacks. Then he held up a nickel, bent backwards and placed the coin on his forehead. With one quick motion, he jerked his head forward and the nickel spun down into the funnel. “Bet you can’t do that.” he said.

“What, are you kidding me?” sneered Richie. “If you can do it, I can certainly do it.” He snatched the funnel from Esopa and placed it inside his belt. Then he bent back to put the coin on his forehead. With that Esopa poured a drink into the funnel!

While we roared with laughter, Richie fumed. Just then Leone came through the door. “Hey, Donny!” shouted Richie. “Come over here. I want to show you something!” As Donny approached, Richie shuffled toward him with the funnel stuck in his pants. “I’ll bet you can’t do this...” He leaned backwards, put the nickel on his forehead – and Esopa poured another drink into the funnel! We collapsed in near-hysteria as Richie spluttered and moaned. Eventually even he had to concede the humor in all that, but poor Richie never did get to pull that trick on anyone else!

I lived to play lame practical jokes on my friends. On another occasion when Maureen and I were attending a Kiwanis installation at the Bounty Inn, I knew that Richie had been assigned to collect money at the door. I used that opportunity to purchase a \$50 bag of loose pennies from the bank where I worked. When we got to the Bounty, I presented them to Richie to pay for our admission. He actually thought it was pretty funny at the time. I don’t think he was laughing the next day when he went to the bank to deposit the installation proceeds and they told him he would have to put the pennies in rolls labeled with the account number before they could accept them!

Along about this time, when Frank Basile was club President, he and I got together and formed the Kiwanis Softball League. We went out and purchased some really patriotic uniforms for our team, including red white and blue-striped pants. At our first game, someone on the opposing team said we “looked like clowns”. That irritated me, so the next game I showed up in uniform wearing an orange fright wig and a red bulb nose. I stepped into the batters box, pounded the plate with my bat and roared, “Who said we look like clowns?” I think our appearance may have lulled a few teams into a false sense of complacency, because we won a lot of games in those days. We had Don Gerraputa and Don Esopa as co-managers, with Frank “Pop” Basile Sr. and Al Basile Sr. as coaches. We were all mostly in our thirties then, and we had a blast playing ball for a number of years.

I recall once Richie Vicario struck out swinging twice in one game. If you’ve ever played slow-pitch softball you can probably appreciate how hard that is to do! After the second strike-out, Al Basile and I grabbed Richie by the hands and feet and deposited him in a nearby trash can. He squawked like mad because he was wedged in and couldn’t get himself out. In the process I think he made up some new swear words that even we had never heard before!

The club was pretty active in sporting events during this period. We played charity softball and basketball games against newscaster Jerry Scott and the staff of WGBB, a local radio station. Then there was the basketball game against the Inwood Buccaneers. Whenever we replaced a player, Bob Basile and Butch Jackson would go out onto the court dressed as medics and carry the departing player to the sidelines on a stretcher. We played a charity basketball game against the Lawrence High School Alumni and thought we were being sly by bringing in a ringer. Frank Basile convinced a business associate of his who was six foot eight to play for us. Only problem was that he turned out to be a big gah-voon who couldn’t shoot, rebound or dribble the ball. We got a butt-kicking, which is probably what we deserved for pulling that stunt. We even participated in a hilarious donkey baseball game, playing like a bunch of jackasses against the Long Island Lighting Company. All in good fun, and all for good causes.

There must have been something about our club that made it a magnet for zany situations. I remember one time when our own Sal Accomando was Lt. Governor of our Division. Sal had a brainstorm about bringing us all on an interclub to visit our Kiwanis buddies in Rockville Centre. So on a frigid, snowy night, twenty stoonods set out with Lt. Gov. Sal on icy roads to RVC, only to find out that the club wasn’t meeting that evening! Sal got an earful from a bunch of frozen, angry Kiwanians, and in fact, hasn’t heard the last of it to this day!

In those days the club used to hold an annual excursion every fall to West Point to take in an Army football game and experience the wonderful cadet pageantry. During one of those trips I discovered that there was an old Revolutionary War redoubt, Fort Putnam, atop a hill behind the football stadium. Since many in our group were interested in seeing it, I led about 25 Kiwanians, wives and children up the steep rocky hill through thick woods, bramble bushes and treacherous pitfalls. When we finally reached the top half an hour later, our legs ached and we were scratched, bruised and filthy. As we stepped out of the woods, I was horrified to find that there was a road on the other side of the hill leading directly to the fort. We could have easily driven there in about a minute and a half! I can tell you that the group was not too happy with me after that!

On another trip, we didn't quite sell out the bus, so Chris McGrath tried to "scalp" the remaining tickets outside the stadium. Unfortunately for Chris, someone reported him to the Military Police, who detained him for questioning. Unknown to Chris, I was the one who turned him in! I figured that if anyone could talk his way out of a mess like that it would certainly be our attorney, Chris McGrath. I was right about that!

There were so many wacky times like these that I'm hard-pressed to decide which to include in this narrative. Maybe I should just limit myself to those excessively-nutty fiascos involving Richie Vicario and Donny Leone.

Now I know that I've spent quite a bit of time discussing pranks I pulled on Richie, but it was actually Donny who was my favorite patsy. Leone was just the perfect fall guy, and as a result I did some terrible things to him, often with the help of others. Due to his size, we even gave him softball uniform ½! Sometimes at the Bounty after Donny had downed a few drinks and was feeling no pain, I'd fill up his jacket pockets with silverware and bowls of peanuts or pretzels while he sat oblivious to what was going on. When he finally went home, he clanked like the "Tin Man" from "The Wizard of Oz". The next day, after realizing what had happened, Donny would admonish me with a long, drawn-out, "Yooooouuuuu bastard!" It was almost impossible to keep a straight face through that! With each successive prank, it became my goal to extend Donny's "Yooooouuuuu" even further than the last time!

As bad as I was to Donny, I probably wasn't the worst culprit. That claim likely fell to Don Esopa and Vic Liotta, who truly tormented the poor guy. Leone lived in the first house directly behind the Bounty Inn. Some Wednesday nights he'd come to the meeting and say, "I've got to get home early tonight. My wife's on the warpath." So, of course, Esopa and Liotta would feed him drinks until poor Donny was sufficiently plastered, then they'd either dump him on his front lawn, or drive him out to Suffolk County and leave him there. Mod-awn, even I wasn't that cruel!

Well, this one particular week, Don and Vic escorted an inebriated Leone to his front steps about two hours past curfew, rang the bell and ran. The next morning at my office, I got a scathing phone call from Fran Leone. Frannie roasted me up one side and down the other for leading her husband astray like that. I had no idea what she was talking about. "But...but...but...", I spluttered. Finally, after chewing me out with the profane thoroughness of a drill sergeant, Fran slammed down the phone in a fury before I could even begin to defend myself.

I was flabbergasted. Now I'll admit that I had done a couple of mean things to Donny, (well, maybe more than a couple.) But this was one occasion when I was truly innocent. It was sort of like the situation where a criminal gets convicted of something he didn't do because the jury felt that he'd probably done something else to merit being locked up anyway. I guess I got what was coming to me, however it wasn't for the sins I'd actually committed. And those two jabornies Esopa and Liotta got off scott-free! I don't think I've ever repaid them for that!

To digress for just a moment, the Bounty Inn was the scene of many fun nights during those early years of Kiwanis. Jerry Thompson, the owner, was also a member of the club, and he really

went out of his way to cater to us. Jerry used to throw Halloween costume parties at the restaurant, and sing-alongs on New Years Eve. And we held all our installation dinner-dances there. Great fun. One snowy night during Christmas week the members and wives used the Bounty as a starting point for caroling on the back of a flat-bed truck with Butch Jackson driving. Butch somehow got us stuck in a snowdrift behind the 4th precinct in Hewlett, where we ended up having a snowball fight with the local urchins. Wonderful times.

Maureen and I went to the Bounty one night to celebrate our anniversary, and Jerry treated us like visiting royalty. He fussed over us, sent a bottle of champagne to our table, and generally made us feel like the most important people in the place. Unfortunately, our good friend Jerry Thompson was later killed in an accident, and the Bounty was never the same after that. The new owners never welcomed us the way Jerry had. Eventually the Peninsula Kiwanis Club moved to a different restaurant, and the Bounty Inn finally closed its doors, leaving us all saddened, but with some great memories.

We had so many good times while based at the Bounty Inn that it would be impossible to describe them all here. I remember one year the club was participating in the Memorial Day parade at Inwood. Troublemaker Liotta somehow located an old Army howitzer that he towed along in front of us as we marched. We hooked up a yachting starter cannon to it that fired shotgun shells. When I tell you that it was extremely loud, that would be a gross understatement. As we paraded along, we'd let loose a shot periodically that would stun unsuspecting onlookers and send them reeling backward. As we neared the end of the line of march, we turned a corner where a cop was directing traffic. When we got alongside of him, I triggered a blast that sent his cap spiraling away, and him diving to the ground! We got the hell out of there very quickly, I can tell you, before that poor cop recovered enough to chase the perpetrators! Oh, by the way... After the parade, Vic drove to Leone's house and left the howitzer in his driveway! I still don't know how Donny eventually got it to the junkyard!

One summer, Al Basile invited Donny and me to spend the weekend at his cabin upstate. We left on a Friday evening, toting coolers full of stuffed shells, meatballs and other delicacies our wives had cooked up for us. Donny also brought along a case of beer that he began demolishing while we drove. One important aside: I've never known anyone who could drink as much beer as Donny and not have to go to the bathroom! It was mind-boggling to me that such a little guy, who stood just a shade over five feet tall, could hold that much beer! He had, in fact, consumed most of it before we finally reached our destination.

Well, the journey took a bit longer than expected. As we got closer to the cabin, Al stopped at several of the local "watering holes" to buy us a drink. By the time we got to his place, Donny and I were pretty well snockered. We stumbled into bed, only to be awakened several hours later at dawn by the sound of a tractor approaching. Al's neighbor, old man "Hank", was coming up the hill to say hello.

We all staggered into the living room, where Al and I were brought up short by one of the funniest sights we'd ever seen. As I mentioned earlier, Donny was a very short fellow. This morning, his eyes were blood-shot, and he emerged wearing a pair of baggy boxer shorts that

hung down all the way to the middle of his shins! Despite our hangovers, Al and I roared with laughter at this ridiculous sight!

Anyway, when Hank came to the door, Al introduced us as his friends. He told Hank that we were both “sick”. Hank just laughed. He said something about it being “bought sickness”. How right he was.

Later that morning, after we had downed several gallons of coffee, Al took us skeet shooting. Now I have to tell you, with the headache I had, skeet shooting was about the last thing I wanted to do. But it ended up being a lot of fun. And we laughed all weekend and for many years thereafter retelling the story about Donny’s shorts!

In the fall of 1983, Donny Leone died of a heart attack while driving home from work. One of my closest friends was gone just before he reached his fortieth birthday. The impact on Richie, me and the rest of the club was devastating. At the first Kiwanis meeting after Donny’s funeral, we held a memorial service for him. There were a lot of tears that night, since Donny was one of the most beloved members of the club. We drank a toast to him – with beer – because that seemed the most appropriate thing to do.

Donny’s death was something of a tipping point for the Peninsula Club. After he died, Kiwanis didn’t seem quite as much fun as it had before. Richie especially took Donny’s passing very hard. He gradually stopped coming to meetings, and eventually resigned from the club altogether. I continued on as a member, but things were never again as carefree and light-hearted as they had been previously.

With Richie’s resignation, the club sustained another great loss. He was far and away the finest natural agitator I’ve ever known. He could probably have made the Pope call him an SOB! Yet, Richie had a talent for aggravating people and making them laugh simultaneously. Sometimes he’d spot our resident attorney, Chris McGrath, on the road and flip him the bird or sniff the air and mutter, “I smell a lawyer!” Given the size of his nose, that was almost believable. Or he’d ride Jack Kelly, who was really French, not Irish, about his heritage. Richie would call him “Froggy”, or “Jacques Strappe”. Jack never got insulted, and always laughed heartily along with the rest of us. And Richie frequently accused Dom Sciarrotta Sr. of speaking “broken Italian”! He really kept us in stitches, and a good deal of that was lost when he left the club.

Richie Vicario died of cancer in 2009 at age 66. His passing marked the loss of the last of my closest childhood friends. I miss him and the others badly, and think about them every day. But remaining as a member of the Peninsula Club became very important to me in that it helped to sustain something of the connection I had to my lost friends. And I’ll always cherish the many wonderful memories of the fun times we shared in the early days of the Peninsula Kiwanis Club.