



The View from Right Field

by Rick Ohler

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“The Learning Curveball”

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In the grand scheme of things, 350 columns doesn't stand out as a huge accomplishment. There are plenty of columnists who have written thousands of columns, as many as three a week, making my bi-weekly offerings from Right Field seem rather paltry. Still, 350 is certainly more than I ever imagined when then-editor Robert Lowell Goller and reporter Libby Maeder asked me to consider a sports-themed column back in June of 2005. What could I possibly write about, week in and week out, I thought? But the columns came one at a time (“bird by bird” for you Annie Lamott fans), sometimes easily, like lifting the lid off a jar to discover an idea that had already taken shape, other times with difficulty like digging a hole in rocky soil in search of uncertain treasure. But one way or another, I've managed for 350 consecutive every-other Thursdays (assuming I finish this one) to get my thoughts collected into a thousand words or so for the world's best hometown newspaper.

I've had a lot of fun writing these missives from Right Field—concentrating first on sports but then moving on to even greater mysteries and celebrations of life in general. A few years ago I was moved from the sports pages to the editorial page and given free range to write about almost anything, a writer's dream come true. I time-traveled back to the Oakwood Avenue of my youth, reimagining a simpler time we all yearn for. I brought readers along as my kids grew up, left home and eventually had their own kids. I've tried to celebrate those who make our little corner of the world a great place and I try not to dwell on those who have, shall we say, a less than positive influence on our community's well-being. You know who you are. I promised when I began that I would traffic in neither politics nor religion, a promise that, except for a few slip-ups, I have kept.

The management of the paper and the four editors I have served under have also seen fit to let me write about other stuff, too: at least ten high school sports, profiles of people we needed to know better, upcoming events, new businesses, obituaries and the various adventures of our citizens at home and abroad. With all that

experience you might think I've figured this writing business out, that I might be keeper of some sort of literary arcana (RIP Snake). *Au contraire, mon frère*, as the expression goes. I'm still learning every day about how to write.

Which brings me, at long last, to the point of this 350th View From Right Field.

Town of Wales stalwart Pat Spahn—you might know her as the former owner of Nuwer's Florist—dropped in to the Advertiser office the other day on one of my Wednesday residencies. We got to talking about the Veterans Day ceremonies in Wales that she had helped organize along with Dee Zeigel. A couple of amazing things were going to happen at that ceremony. The featured speaker was going to be Peter Hadley, a Holocaust survivor who was rescued as a three-year-old by American soldiers after the Battle of the Bulge and landed, eventually, in South Wales, NY, where he lives quietly with his wife. Then there would be the dedication of a marble bench at the Wales Town Park in honor of Specialist 4th Class Eric "Ricky" Jednat, who was killed in Vietnam 50 years ago.

As I set about covering Wales Veterans Day story, my instinct was to concentrate on Mr. Hadley's fascinating story, and to make the Jednat story a secondary concern. I would contact a member of the Jednat family to get a comment and that would be that. Wow, was I wrong.

I first spoke to Alan Jednat, brother of Eric, in Alabama, where he has lived with his wife Judy for many years, working on off-shore drilling platforms, after returning from his own tour in Vietnam with the U.S. Navy. My short phone call turned out to be an hour long. Alan, who is my age give or take a few months, and I chatted about our youthful years—he in Wales and me in East Aurora—and the people we both knew. We reminisced about the rivalry between Iroquois and East Aurora and the abuse heaped upon their totem pole and our statues in front of what was then the high school on Main Street by opposing sports teams. We talked about his brother, his big brother, the wrestler, the tough guy, the guy who never backed down. And then we talked about the day in July of 1968 when the stoic young men in crisp military uniforms pulled up in front of his Wales Hollow house to give Eric's parents, Mary and Eric Jednat, Sr., the awful news. Ricky, age 21, had been killed by a roadside explosive device, one month before the end of his Vietnam tour. Alan told me his brother urged him in a letter to enlist in the Navy rather than get drafted and end up in 'Nam. Alan did enlist but asked for the dangerous river duty, in part to avenge his brother's death. Unbeknownst to him, his mother pulled some strings with the help of the family's pastor, Rev. John Fehringer of Wales Hollow Lutheran, and Congressman Jack Kemp, and Alan was deployed on a supply ship off Vietnam's shore, keeping him (relatively) safe.

I next spoke with Mark and Jodi Jednat, who were willing to travel from their Freedom, NY, home to meet me in the Oakwood Room at the Right Field Satellite Office. Pat Spahn, Dave Newell and his friend Nancy and Denny Newell, joined us. Once again, what I had thought might be a short conversation turned into an hour

and 45 minutes of reminiscence. The Jednats brought with them a box of photographs, newspaper clippings about Eric's wrestling triumph at Iroquois, letters written by Eric to his mom and dad. Soon, I was transported to a special place called Wales Hollow, a small, tight-knit neighborhood that sits just off Route 78 on East Creek Road. I heard about Jednats and Newells and the other families that lived together, played together, churched together and cared for one another in the good times and in the years after they lost one of their own.

We read letters from Ricky that talked of the mundane—the car he was hoping buy when he got home, generic comments about his situation in Vietnam, tempered no doubt so that Mary wouldn't worry. He wrote of his girlfriend, Linda, whom he hoped to marry in the near future. We read the official but formulaic letters from Pres. Johnson and Gen. Abrams to the Jednats and the personal and consoling letter from Pastor Feheringer: "...though he did not like war, he hated oppression more...he gave his all and we are proud of him for it."

I got the feeling that the simple act of dedicating a memorial bench and the willingness of a complete stranger to listen intently as a family remembered the man they still think of as a big brother, the guy they I looked up, their hero, allowed some measure of healing and made him whole again, if only for a moment. Eric Jednat was not, after all, just one of the 58,220 killed in Vietnam; he was a son, brother, childhood friend, and member of the Wales Hollow family.

In those situations, the writer hopes he has been genuinely respectful and helpful. Yesterday, I arrived at the Satellite Office and was presented with a bar chip wrapped in a Guest Check that read simply, "From Alabama, Thanks." I'm off to column No. 351, hopeful as ever of getting the words right.