

Birth, Death and Baseball

I admit that I was a little slow to catch the symbolism of things happening right before my eyes a few Saturday nights ago.

Earlier that afternoon, we had assembled, as seems to be a regular occurrence these days, at Wood's funeral home for visitation hours with a grieving family, followed by a memorial service. (It's helpful that we now have three quality funeral homes in town—Comfort in South Wales, Howe on Maple and Wood's on East Main—to accommodate the demand. As I have spent too much time in all three lately, I can attest that each offers dignified, professional service.)

On this Saturday, we had come to bid farewell to one of our own, Peter Bennett—EAHS alumnus from the Class of '73, Turtle Soup cook and host, friend, father, brother, uncle, angler, funnyman, townie. Among the speakers at the service was Dave Bojanowski of the famed Mill Road Bojes. Dave gave as thoughtful a eulogy as we've heard, and, believe me, we've heard a bunch lately. I won't be able to quote him verbatim, and I trust he'll forgive me for putting quotation marks around my paraphrasing of his eloquent words.

He began by holding up both hands in front of him, his thumbs at right angles to his fingers and positioned to suggest a picture frame. "It's a comforting sight," he said, sizing up the crowd through his frame, "to look out on this congregation and the see everyone here, all the individual pieces that make up the patchwork quilt of community. But then I wouldn't expect anything less." As he waxed eloquently about his departed friend, our departed friend, he returned many times to his original metaphor of the quilt, the mosaic, the collage that manifests itself when family and friends need support. It was a stirring talk and an affirmation of the townie Gemeinschaft (RIP, Snake).

Following the service, we adjourned to the northeast banquet room at the southeast corner of Oakwood and Elm, occasionally known as the Right Field Satellite Office, but today playing host to more important events. Soon, the Trifecta—pizza, wings and beer—would emanate in a steady stream from the bar and kitchen (now in the capable hands of head chef Kevin Wilson) in an effort soften the grief of mourners and enhance the feelings of kinship.

A few days earlier, I had spoken with new Wallenwein's owner Ben Holmes, scion of the expansive Holmes family that has operated the bar for 47 years. He told me that, in fact, he had two events scheduled for the east side of the building at the same time, one in the front room, another in the back. I wondered if the two groups might make for a crowded time.

I needn't have worried.

As our celebration of Peter's life reached its crescendo, partygoers for the other event began to arrive. I recognized many of them, young men of about my son's age. I had written about most of them in the world's best hometown newspaper—some for their football exploits, others for baseball, soccer, cross country or basketball, a few for several sports. I recalled that only a few weeks before this fraternity had been part of the solemn service when one of their own had been the focus of a funeral, his life cut short by drugs. This time, though, they weren't mourning. They had each arrived with a large bundle, bundles that soon made a wall six feet tall and ten feet long. The names on the bundles—Pampers and Huggies and a few generics—brought an I-remember-those-days smile to my face. It was a diaper shower. Jeff Stoll, EAHS alum, Village of East Aurora employee and assistant Blue Devils football coach, was about to become a father and his bros were helping with some of the essentials.

Before long, the parties began to fold into each other until, by 8:00, it would have been difficult to determine if a given celebrant had come from the memorial or the diaper shower or if the hot wings belonged to the back room or the front. Not that it mattered, because the blending of the occasions befitted their situations, a symbol of the circle of life where the passing of one was mourned while the coming of a new life was welcomed.

But the title of this offering from Right Field promised birth, death AND baseball. I haven't forgotten.

I mentioned Ben Holmes as the new owner of Wallenwein's, a transfer of power that has us railbirds unanimously thrilled and has retiring owner, Walter E. (Stubby) Holmes, relieved. You will find Ben young, personable and smart. He understands how to keep us cheap old farts happy in a traditional tavern setting while still encouraging millennials and people with a few bucks in their wallet to make Wally's their destination restaurant. And Ben plays a big role in the birth, death and baseball symbolism.

Ben shares the puzzling Holmes family allegiance to that Major League Baseball team from the Bronx. His father Dana Holmes shares that allegiance (as evidenced by his tattoos and Harley gas tank), Stubby Holmes shares it, as did his late son Lance, about whom I wrote in January. One of Ben's first events at his new bar will be the April 2nd First Annual Opening Day Cookout and Fundraiser to honor the memory of Lance Holmes, as knowledgeable and loyal a baseball fan as I have ever known. My son and I will be guest bartenders along with veteran Anita O'Scier; there will be hot dogs on the grill; peanuts on the bar and Yankees baseball on the TVs. I will make the supreme sacrifice and wear a Yankees hat (although my Red Sox boxers will tell the real story). At 1:10 we will welcome another baseball season, and another spring, even as we bid a fond farewell to Lance. Consider yourselves invited.

All tips will benefit Lance's favorite organization, the Boys and Girls Club of East Aurora, which will install him on its Alumni Wall of Fame come July.