

The Last Word

Memories, insights, and reflections

College Friend

In the spring of 1970—a period marked forever by the shootings at Kent State, student strikes, and a campus outcry against war—I chose a somewhat less political route: I joined a fraternity.

Theta Chi, the red-and-white house near the end of College Place, was better known for its libidinous mutt, who chased female canines all over campus, than for its collective grade point average, athletic prowess, or political awareness. But I was comfortable there. It beat sharing a tiny space with a roommate that I was not particularly fond of.

I liked the people at Theta Chi, most of all Marty Doppelt, a fellow freshman pledge who was tall and broad-shouldered, with curly blond hair. I was drawn to his *joie de vivre*, his wit, and his easy manner. We became fast friends. At a time of student unrest, Marty and I were more interested in having a good time than in protesting against the war. Instead of going to marches, we went to bars. Instead of chasing grades, we pursued girls.

We roomed together during our junior and senior years. Side by side, we competed on fraternity basketball and football teams; Marty was always our captain and motivating force. We frequented the same hangouts on Marshall Street and Erie Boulevard. We ate our meals elbow-to-elbow, complaining in unison about the fraternity food.

Living together, we each became intimately familiar with the other's eccentricities. Marty, for example, insisted on arriving at every class at least 20 minutes early. Taking a seat in the rear (so he could exit quickly), he would methodically remove his books and check his pens as he waited for the rest of the

Steven Clark '73 is vice president of The Rowland Co., a public relations firm in New York City. At SU, he was a member of Theta Chi fraternity, where a 15-year friendship with Marty Doppelt '73 began.

class to assemble. He was the only person I ever met who wore the face of his watch on the inside of his wrist. As with everything, Marty had a seemingly plausible—but, in retrospect, outrageous—answer for this: By wearing the watch this way, he said, the face is preserved and protected from the elements.

In turn, Marty put up with me, a prudent dresser who wore the same pair of pants to class for nearly the entire time we roomed together. At graduation, I presented the pants to him as an heirloom, which he kept, he later said, “until they walked off into the sunset.”

Throughout our years in Syracuse, Marty led, and I was content to follow. He was more outgoing and sure of himself than I was. He frequently told people what he thought, whether they wanted to hear it or not; yet, he made surprisingly few enemies. He possessed an unmistakable presence. And, while he never would be mistaken for Warren Beatty, women were strongly attracted to him. He had a sense of himself that men, too, found irresistible.

An era of tossing footballs and gorging ourselves on tuna bombs ended with our graduation in 1973. Marty went to Chicago to study law, and I found work in New York as a newspaper reporter. Our friendship, though, remained strong.

He served as best man at my wedding. Holly and I flew to Chicago when he and Alice were married several years later. Each time we were reunited, even though months may have passed, we would easily pick up where we had left off. Our wives became good friends, and the four of us took vacations together in the Bahamas and Puerto Rico.

It was in these later years that I began to appreciate more fully what made Marty so special. Partly, it was his personal magnetism—that quality political writers call charisma. More prosaic, however, was his ability to listen and truly care about his friends. He took special pride in their accomplishments and respected his friends in such a way that they would begin to



Marty Doppelt '73

expect more from themselves as well.

Marty was a partner in a growing Chicago law firm, but he was no yuppie. He made fun of the lifestyle of many of his contemporaries by putting a toy phone in the trunk of his car. “Oh yes,” he’d say matter-of-factly, “I just had a phone put in my car.”

He loved to rent old and quite forgettable movies; he scoured videocassette stores for tapes loaded more with dust than with plot twists, then spent his weekend nights screening them long after his wife had fallen asleep. He also enjoyed visiting the blackjack tables while on vacation. He had a rough exterior, and at times could be opinionated and pig-headed. To those who didn’t know him, he could even be intimidating. Yet, to his friends, he was always loyal and giving, to the point of being a soft touch.

It was a friendship that I was confident would endure forever. Fifteen years, however, is hardly forever.

It was early on a Sunday morning in June when the phone rang, at a time reserved for wrong numbers and bad news. My wife answered the phone. It was instantly clear that it was not a wrong number.

Marty was dead. According to a news story, Marty was killed when his car was hit broadside by a car that ran a red light.

Months later, I am still in shock, still disbelieving. Death should not come to 33-year-old men who have everything in the world to live for—especially one as seemingly invincible as Marty.

Two days after Marty died, I was in Chicago for his funeral. Here, I met hundreds of his other close friends, all with their own “Marty stories” to tell. After all, during his lifetime Marty had collected friends like some people collect stamps.

“You felt that only good things could happen to you when you were with Marty,” I told his brother Arthur. “He may not have been the best-looking guy, but he got the girl. He wasn’t the most talented player, but he won the game. He wasn’t necessarily the brightest or the hardest worker, but you knew he would be a success.”

I remember my father saying before I began my freshman year at Syracuse that life’s strongest and most rewarding friendships are those formed in college. He was right.

College roommates can become closer than brothers. Experiences shared in college are precious, the memories lasting forever. And while you and your friends eventually go your separate ways, moving on to careers and marriage and children, and though you may even live in different cities, that bond remains firm.

Marty Doppelt’s flame went out during the early morning hours of June 2, 1985, but it will never be extinguished in the hearts of those of us who were fortunate to have known and loved him. As for me, the memories I have of Marty will remain, like letters from an old friend, easily accessible and preserved forever. I will never forget his warmth, humor, and generosity. And I’ll always consider him my best friend.

—Steven Clark '73