



“Mr. G” was a fun enforcer

By Ray Duckler / Concord Monitor columnist

June 25, 2011

No one wanted to be on the Hit List, posted near the front office each morning at Concord High.

That meant you were in trouble, maybe spotted kissing too passionately in the hallway or skipping a class.

That meant you had to wait outside the assistant principal’s door. Thankfully, Michael Garrett was the man who motioned you inside, serving as judge and jury for 25 years before retiring in 2000.

Mr. G., as students called him, died Tuesday from congestive heart failure related to a host of illnesses in recent years. He was 76.

Former students say he cushioned the blow with wit and humor, while remaining firm at the same time. Mr. G. knew how to teach you a lesson without hurting your self-esteem.

He listened to you, looking straight into your eyes as you explained what had happened and why. Mr. G., his students say, never acted like the enemy, as so many other administrators always seemed to do.

“He was the best, even when he punished us”, said Amy Stanley-Chabot of Rollinsford, Concord High Class of 1991. “We still respected him because he was always fair. You knew you did wrong, but it was okay because with Mr. G. the meetings always ended with a smile.”

A likeable assistant principal ? Didn’t those front-office people have fangs and claws and schemes to make your life miserable ?

Apparently not all of them. That's why a website dedicated to Mr. G.'s memory had nearly 400 tributes by late afternoon yesterday.

"He was understanding and caring," Patti Cloutier of Concord, Class of '91, said via email. "He cared about all his kids. He talked to you, not at you. I loved Mr. Garrett. He always had your back, no matter what."

A pushover?

Hardly.

If Mr. G. had to lower the boom, he'd lower the boom, suspending you, then sending a letter home to your parents.

But a Mr. G. letter was a different sort of letter.

"He'd find a funny way to suspend you from school", said Carter Garrett, 42, a computer engineer in North Carolina and the youngest of Garrett's five children.

"His letter always started with a limerick. Probably millions of people out there have gotten his letters for smoking in the boys' room. The parents would get a letter saying, "There was a man from Nantucket", those types of things. He may have upset some people, but the majority of them thought he was funny."

Carter, his siblings and Bette, the matriarch of the family, gathered this week at the couple's retirement home in Lamoine, on the coast of Maine. They told stories and laughed and celebrated a life that touched so many.

Concord's Chris Garrett, 51, the director of radio stations in Manchester and Portsmouth, is Mr. G.'s oldest son. He remembered the time he and his friends went to a dance at Concord High. They bought a case of Molson beer and stashed it in the car. Then, during a break, they went outside to drink it.

Strangely, one bottle was missing.

“The next morning I’m making a sandwich for lunch”, Garrett said. “He sat down, pops open a Molson Golden and says, “Hey, did anything happen last night that I didn’t know about ?” He had this smile on his face and didn’t have to say a word. Nothing was discussed beyond that, and I never did it again.”

There was a serious side to Mr. G., of course. A side of leadership and communal spirit. He served on the city council for 10 years, created the Concord Conservation Commission, coached youth baseball and the YMCA swim team, led hikes up mountains and planted trees on Earth Day.

Up in Lamoine, Mr. G. joined the planning board, cleaning up gravel pits and protecting land from greedy developers. Mainers don’t accept outsiders easily, but this outsider was Lamoine’s Citizen of the Year in 2010.

“He just went wholeheartedly into his second career, all volunteer work,” said Bette, who married Mr. G. in 1956. “Up in Maine, they say to people who move there, “You’re from away”, but he became beloved by the town.”

Here too, years before.

Mr. G. treated everyone equally, no matter who you were, where you came from or how you lived your life.

“Being a teenage mom, trying to make it, he never once looked down on me,” Kelly Parisi, Class of ‘96, wrote in an email. “He was understanding and compassionate. He (gave) great advice and worked hard to support and help me make it through school, which was not easy for me.”

Humor, it seems, is what Mr. G. used to connect with kids and everyone else. As Joyce Mamos, longtime secretary for the athletic department, said through tears, “His wit and intelligence knew no bounds. He had a dry sense of humor, he was kind and compassionate. I don’t think Mike realized the number of lives he impacted and the friends that he had.”

Melissa Fisk, a human resources recruiter in Tilton, recalled Mr. G.'s morning announcements. Her favorite? "The issue of loud mastication in the cafeteria."

"He made school fun, and his smile was absolutely contagious," Fisk said, "He was a real gem."

The shine began to fade five years ago, when Mr. G. was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease. His immune system took a hit from chemotherapy. Pneumonia wasn't uncommon.

On Easter Sunday this year, with his legs swelling from cellulitis and the bounce in his step reduced from hip problems, Mr. G. went to the hospital and never returned home.

Seriously ill later at a nursing home, Mr. G. kept things light. At least as light as he could.

"In the last days he was joking, even though I think he lost some of his will toward the end", Bette said. "He was still able to smile. He'd just tell us to get out and find something to do."

His heart, the one he gave to the Concord student body through 15 years as a history teacher and 25 more as the assistant principal, stopped giving on Tuesday.

Word spread like the "Hit List" through the Concord High hallways.

"Lots of other teachers have died, and it was always sad," Stanley-Chabot said, "But when I read about Mr. G., it was different. He pushed us to places we never thought we could go."

(Ray Duckler can be reached at 369-3304 or rduckler@cmonitor.com.)