

Kenny



Kenny spent the last seven years of his life, from age sixteen until he was twenty-three, working the streets of Los Angeles, helping the poor and homeless. He not only saw the suffering, he felt the anguish that pervades the homeless and decided that he would do something about it.

Kenny suffered for others, even when he was very young, he couldn't stand to see anyone in pain. It was all right for him to feel pain, but not others. I first noticed this when he was two years old and we were standing, watching a parade. A woman, with braces on both legs and walking with the help of a cane, passed by us. Kenny, seeing this, buried his face in his mother's stomach and started to cry. Even at that young age he couldn't stand to see someone suffer.

Kenny was also, "Champion of the Underdog." One morning, while being dropped off for his fifth grade class, Kenny saw three boys, on the other side of the street, beating up a small African American boy. He immediately ran to the other side of the street, and jumped into the fight. He wasn't about to see something like this happen without getting involved. He cared little about the consequences or what might happen to him, he was only determined to stop three boys from beating up one. He was always bringing home a stray dog, cat or other little creature that had been abandoned. But, in Kenny's case, it didn't stop there. He also brought home the young person, from his school or neighborhood that didn't fit in, or the outcast who was not liked by the other kids. He was the Champion of those less fortunate and unpopular, the Champion of the helpless little people that lived in his small world.

Kenny was always popular in school, liked by his teachers and trusted by both peers and adults alike. One of the main reasons for his popularity came from his ability to listen to others and do so because he cared about what they had to say. He was empathetic and understanding and he had a way of making you feel important, like you really mattered. After talking to Kenny, you walked away feeling a little better about yourself, no matter the magnitude of your problem. He truly enjoyed associating with and talking to adults and was as equally comfortable around adults as he was someone his own age.

Kenny placed little importance on those issues that might make him more popular with others and was a person who, “Danced to the tune of his own drummer,” if you don’t mind me using that cliché to give you an idea of who Kenny was. I say that, because he is the only person that I have ever known that the expression truly fits. I would have to say that his little sister, Nicole is a good deal like Kenny in that regard, and seems to exhibit this trait more and more each day. I must admit, I am proud that she displays many of Kenny’s characteristics and wish I could say that the world was full of people like Kenny and Nicole. Sadly the world isn’t, and sadly those qualities that I admire most, didn’t come from me. Only the independence shown by Kenny and Nicole could be attributed to me.

Kenny loved people, all people, so the following shouldn’t have come as a surprise. Shortly before Christmas, Kenny approached his mother and me with a plan and a special request. He was now a sixteen year old, with a valid California driver license and a Volkswagen Beetle. Kenny’s plan was for us to give him the money that we had planned to spend on his Christmas presents. Then, along with the money that he had planned to spend on our Christmas presents, he would instead, buy blankets that he would distribute to the homeless Christmas morning. The thought that Kenny had come up with this idea, by himself, seemed quite noble and made both his Mom and me feel proud. Doing this by himself on Christmas morning, when he should be with his family, was another matter altogether and didn’t sit well with me. However, once Kenny had made up his mind to do something, there was little that could be said or done to change what, at that point, had to be done. Reluctantly his Mother and I agreed, and with that, Kenny was started on the first of what would be many trips to help those less fortunate than he.

Kenny ventured into Los Angeles many times during the following seven years. What made his trips to help the homeless different was the fact that he never talked about what he did. Many people do good deeds, and many people do it out of the goodness of their heart, not expecting anything in return. However, there are few who provide support, as a volunteer, without the expectation of at least a small “Ata-Boy” for their effort. Not Kenny, he never mentioned the fact that he had made one of his special trips to L.A., or that he was going to make one, or even what had happened when he had made one. This was Kenny’s very own, private undertaking and he never asked for, or received recognition for what he had done or was doing. In this regard Kenny was special. What he did was done without reservation, without fanfare, with only the satisfaction that he himself garnered from helping others. Looking for approval or recognition would have made what Kenny did seem less significant, less special. The way that Kenny took care of business, well, that was the uniqueness and beauty of Kenny.

Kenny did what he felt was necessary to support his mission. Several years after his first trip to L.A., I remember going to my closet and seeing that clothes were missing. I called Kenny in to tell him that someone had apparently broken into our house. But surprisingly, only my clothes had been taken, nothing else. Kenny then said, “No Dad I took those clothes for the homeless.” “How could you” I retorted, “you took my favorite shirt to give to the homeless?” To that, Kenny calmly responded, “No Dad, I took only the clothes that I hadn’t seen you wear during the past six months.” He was right, I was unable to respond to that and just smiled and walked away. Many more times would find me in front of my closet, and yes, there would be clothes missing. After the first incident, I never mentioned it again; I would just smile and walk away. Kenny would never talk about those trips to L.A. and I never asked. This is how Kenny wanted it to be and this is how it was.

Kenny and I took a short trip, to downtown Los Angeles, the summer before he died, but our trip had nothing to do with helping the homeless. I was taking Kenny to the Jewelry Mart to buy him a watch. We parked perhaps six blocks from the Mart, because finding parking nearer is always difficult. From where we had parked, we would have to walk thru the Skid Row district, to reach the Jewelry Mart. As we walked up Los Angeles Street, we passed one of the many Homeless Missions that dot the area. Then a man, leaving the mission as we walked by, shouted, "Hey, Kenny's here." He then ran across the street to another Mission and before I knew it, there were probably twenty people rushing toward us. They all made a circle around Kenny and with much pushing, laughing, and hugging, displayed all the affection and emotions that tell a person, "You are truly cared for." I just stepped back to the curb and watched in utter amazement. I felt a surge of emotions, looking at my son, knowing that these people truly loved him. Here were the people Kenny had befriended and helped. Here were the unapproachable, the people feared and avoided by most of society, those who suffer daily just to stay alive. Also, here was the young man who sought to end that suffering. That was a very special day in my life, one that I will always cherish. I was a proud father, I was very proud that Kenny was my son.

Kenny died on the fourth of December 1988. He would never again make a trip into Los Angeles to help his friends and he would never again laugh and joke with the homeless, those he cared for. He was gone, but what he had done would live on. That Christmas, Kenny's Mom, along with some friends and I made the last trip into L.A. Sadly, we made the trip, not Kenny. We would deliver all those precious gifts he had collected for this special day. We loaded three pick-up trucks and four cars, and then early Christmas morning we drove into L.A. to distribute these gifts in memory of Kenny. It had been extremely difficult for all of us, all of his many friends, all those who loved him. Making this trip for Kenny didn't ease the pain, but it made the pain a little more bearable. I always tell people, "I went into L.A., that Christmas morning, kicking and screaming, but what I saw that day changed my life forever." For the first time I saw what Kenny had seen those many years before. For the first time I felt the pain and suffering the homeless live with each day. For the first time my eyes were opened to another world that exists within, but far from, the world I live in.

Kenny did teach me what he hadn't been able to teach me while he was still here. It took his death to make me see and understand what Kenny had known at such a young age. I couldn't have taught him what I didn't understand myself, and for that I am ashamed. Yes, Kenny was sensitive and understanding, far beyond his years and maybe God felt that it was time for his Dad to get involved. Maybe it was time for others to take up Kenny's mission and help keep his commitment to the homeless alive. Maybe now Kenny had completed the mission God had intended for him to undertake while here on earth.