

COMMENTARY

# David McGrath: A family get-together resurrects friendly ghosts from my Evergreen Park past

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Funeral cards unearthed during a McGrath family get-together in Wisconsin in July 2023. (David McGrath)

Halloween originated with the ancient Celts of western Europe as a celebration of ghosts and spirits in acknowledgment of and hope for an afterlife.

Which is all well and good, except that my mother, Gertrude McGrath, may have had a better idea, which we learned about this past summer. Mom died 10 years ago, but it wasn't until July, during a family get-together in Wisconsin, that my sister Nancy hauled out all Mom's old photographs.

Predictably, we did a lot of reminiscing that night, laughing, drinking and shedding some tears while sorting through old black-and-whites. There was Uncle Eddie in a thin jacket and his "Untouchables"-era fedora, pushing Nancy and Kevin on a sled down the steep alleyway known as Piggy Toe Mountain in Evergreen Park. Or Grandpa Joe, a wad of Tip Top Tobacco in his cheek, standing next to a fuel pump at his gas station on Halsted Street.



David McGrath's Uncle Eddie holds on to McGrath's sister Nancy in 1961. His siblings James and Kevin are seated in the sled next to them. (Family photo)

Nancy then dug into another of the shoe boxes and pulled out a thick wad of cards bound with a wide brown rubber band, and she handed the stack to me. The card on top featured a 2-by-4-inch satiny color photo of a smiling Jesus, his heart visible and aflame. I slid it out of the

stack and read the inscription on the other side: "In Loving Memory of Daniel J. Whitters; Born Into Life September 7, 1916; Born Into Eternity September 26, 1992."

"Oh, man, it's Uncle Dan!" I said. "I used to lie on the floor on Saturday afternoons, listening to him and Dad talk baseball while they drank Drewrys beer. This holy card must be from his wake."

“There must be (200) or 300 of those in the pile,” my son-in-law Kevin said. “Did Catholics collect those like trading cards or what?”

Not that I knew of. Baseball cards, yes, which my brother James collected. He bought packs with six cards and a flat stick of bubble gum for 5 cents. In 1959, he had every major league player except for Ted Williams who refused to sign with Topps trading card company. James kept them all in a couple of Velveeta cheese boxes for a year or two before they got tossed during spring cleaning.

James wasn't the only one. Kids on 96th Place collected stamps, movie posters, hit records, coins and comic books. But my mother was the only person I've ever known with a treasure trove of funeral cards.

If you have ever attended a wake, you likely have taken one home. They're a little smaller than playing cards, with a saint or a religious scene on one side and the name of the deceased on the other, with the person's birth and death dates and the time and place of their funeral and burial.

Often below their name is a prayer, perhaps written by the saint pictured, which you could read or recite, thereby earning “indulgences” or time off from purgatory for the dearly departed and for yourself.

Mom's hoarding of them was news to me. I knew my parents attended wakes every month, but she never mentioned her impressive collection.

I read aloud another card with the same Jesus picture and flaming heart: William Doyle; At Rest December 23rd, 1976.

“Bill was Uncle Jimmy's best friend,” I said. “He had these penetrating blue eyes, so when he dressed up like Santa Claus at our house one year, all the little kids knew it was Bill because of those eyes.”

We took turns reading:

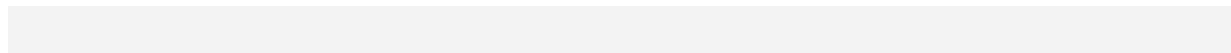
- Katherine Z. Chrustek; 1896-1979; Section 35, Plot 198. She was the mother of my mom's friend Stella who lived in Naples, Florida. Certainly, Mom didn't

fly to Florida for the wake, so she must have gotten it in the mail after sending a sympathy card.

- William McGrath; At Rest, November 1, 1988. “Wild” Uncle Bill used to sing a cappella when he visited, like the comedy actor George Burns. Old Bill would start tap dancing right there in our kitchen.
- Edward J. Cichoszewski, “Kayo”; 1922-2006. My mom’s brother. You could see in some of the old snapshots how when he was a kid, he resembled the character Kayo from the “Moon Mullins” comic strip.

As we dredged up our memories of the departed, the neighbors, relatives and friends whom I had not thought of in decades were reborn right there on our Wisconsin hotel balcony. Their faces, their individual voices, the look in their eyes: All sparked alive thanks to Mom.

We read some more:

- Robert Vojtech; 1945-1990. Bob was the smack-dab middle child of the 10 Vojtech kids, who also included Jack, Alan, Kenny, Joyce, Mary Lou, Don, Joe, Bill and Bonnie. We loved going to their house because all eight McGraths had their own Vojtech kid to play with.
  - Ray Russell. Our late neighbor from two doors down.
  - William J. Farrell, M.D. The McGrath family doctor.
  - Ted Iverson. He let our family vacation at his Saddle Lake home where I caught my first bass.
  - Mary “Monty” McGrath; Born Into Eternity 2010. When she first started dating my brother, she passed muster with all us kids by instigating a huge water fight in the backyard.
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- Thomas Dunne; 1910-1976. Shortly after meeting Tom, my father-in-law, I took him perch fishing in front of the Shedd Aquarium. But I had to tend to his pole as he walked up and down the lakefront all afternoon socializing with the other anglers.

Often at grave sites, priests, rabbis and ministers routinely say the same old words about how the dead will go on living in our hearts. But to my mom, talk was cheap. She took matters into her own hands, making a special place for our beloved “ghosts” so that she and her descendants would remember them always.

And we will, Mom, thanks to you.

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