

David McGrath: Mourning my sister Rosie with loved ones, I felt a spiritual rising



By [DAVID MCGRATH](#)

PUBLISHED: April 18, 2025 at 5:00 AM CDT

I recently bought a round-trip airline ticket, just like millions of other Americans traveling to Florida for spring break or Easter vacation. Except that mine was in the opposite direction, from Florida to Chicago, for the funeral of my sister Rosie.

The Airbus was cramped, but a 40-something couple stepped into the aisle to let me into my window seat. The 1,200-mile journey, lasting three hours, was longer than usual because of a 100 mph headwind. But the woman in the middle let me have the armrest as she leaned forward for the duration while scrolling through her phone. It wasn't until we landed and she lifted the cage that had been under her legs that I realized she was traveling with a tiny dog. Not a peep from the little guy the entire time.

After landing and checking into a newish Holiday Inn in Oak Forest, I turned on the television and dug my razor out of my suitcase to shave. There was a knock on the door, and I answered not wearing a shirt. The woman from the hotel desk stood smiling, holding out my phone, which I'd left in the lobby.

I left the hotel at 3:45 p.m. to drive to the funeral parlor where the wake had begun. The streets, such as Cicero Avenue, were familiar, as I had lived on the South Side most of my life. I thought back to our childhood home for which I still had a framed picture of my sister Rosie at age 4, pushing me in a buggy when I was 3.

When I saw my six other siblings together at the funeral parlor, along with Rosie's grown children, Jennifer and Mike, I steeled myself in the way men are expected. But I could barely speak while embracing my brothers James, Charlie, Kenneth and Kevin and my sister Nancy, who had driven down from Wausau, and Patrick, who had just landed from Phoenix.



Author David McGrath, in buggy, with big sister Rosemary McGrath, circa 1952. (Family photo)

My old friend Orville, who had been my manager when Marianne and I worked at Jewel, came over, and we hugged it out. He said he was sorry, and we both lied about how we looked the same. Orv had briefly dated Rosie back in the day. When I thanked him for driving up from Crete, he said he considered it a “rare thing” to have been a friend to every member of our family for five decades.

Next, I was surrounded by five of the 12 Bracken kids who had lived one door down from us in Evergreen Park. Veronica and Annie were our

babysitters, and Rita was Rosie’s best friend whom I knew well from hanging with Rosie’s crew when she and I were college classmates. They liked to pile into Rosie’s 1960 VW Bug for a trip to Chicago’s Chinatown and a certain spooky lounge with no cover charge. Among them was Marianne, who would become my wife, for which my sister was partly responsible.

Walking to the front of the funeral parlor, I was intercepted by Donna, Bill and Mary Kay, children of Dan Whitters, my late father’s close friend who had married his cousin Betty. The world never felt more right than on summer nights when Dan and my old man talked White Sox and the weather while sitting in lawn chairs — brown bottles of cold Drewrys beer sweating in their hands — while we caught lightning bugs with our cousins in the yard. A wave of that feeling, I swear, washed over me the instant I saw their bright smiles.

John Doyle, who lived four doors down on 96th Place, and whose late brother Joe had been my pal since first grade, rested his hand on my shoulder.

Mike Pavlik, whose family lived across the alley behind ours and who was the leadoff batter on our softball team, squeezed my arm.

Mickey Michau, raised with his four brothers and two sisters on the opposite side of our street and across the alley known as Piggy Toe Mountain because of its steep incline, approached with his wife, Carol, and asked if I might sneak away from the wake for dinner at the Patio restaurant next door.

Mickey's father, my father, Tom Bracken, Bill Doyle, Tom Booth, Nick DiBennardi, Rich Ozmin, Ted Iverson, John Gramer, Dick Burge, Leo Grandi, Len Davis, Walter Remiasz, Emil Mitterman — all Word War II veterans and extraordinary friends who raised their families on those same two adjacent blocks, all passed away, but their children came that night.

The same children who played hide and seek with Rosie and went sledding with us on Piggy Toe on snowy days after school. More than friends growing up, we inherited the bond forged by our fathers, a bond deeply felt half a century later.

Previously, I have written critically about the funeral business. But as funeral customs go, no country gets it more right: Our origin community rushed to my family from many miles, many decades, and many memorable times to lift us up.

I felt a spiritual and physical rising, as though I were being held above a waterfall by multiple soothing hands so that I might see and hear and smell life's preciousness, secure in the knowledge that friends, relatives and even strangers in a hotel and an airplane would not let me fall.

Though my sister departed this world, she left behind footprints, energy, memories and a throng who came together to remind us of their love, lending us light in a time of darkness, and strength and a rebirth of hope at Easter.

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