

Chicago Tribune

Naperville SunNaperville Sun Opinion

David McGrath: Some people just make us feel better about being alive



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There are some people in this world that have faith and see the positive in others, and David McGrath's high school friend Gus was one of them. It's something he remembers well from an Easter many years ago. (Chicago Tribune)



By [David McGrath](#) | Special to the Tribune

PUBLISHED: April 4, 2026 at 9:25 AM CDT

“You know it always rains on Good Friday, right?” Gus said.

It was after our lunch period at St. Joseph’s in Westmont, and the four of us — Gus Kordik, Frank Oberle, John Mathis and I — were hiding behind the high school’s incinerator, sharing a cigarette and planning our time off from school tomorrow. We were required to attend Mass in the morning but classes were canceled after that.

Frank often mocked Gus’ improbable revelations, such as when he swore a saint had appeared to him through his bedroom curtains one night. When Frank asked him why a saint would visit a short, chubby guy with glasses who played goalie, Gus said very matter-of-factly that it was well known that ordinary folks and the poor often received such visions.

“Don’t you remember how it rained last year — rain mixed with some snow?” Gus said. He passed me the cigarette, then eyed each of us for our reaction.

“Yeah, I remember,” Johnny said. “But so what?”

Gus smiled and shook his head: “Come on, man. It’s God.”

It’s what I liked most about Gus Kordik: you had to admire his faith.

Frank and Johnny and a lot of the other teenagers I knew were major league downers with respect to church, parents, school and whatever was in the news. From pet rocks to the Maharishi Yogi, they poked fun at everything.

Not so with Gus. He was always positive. He reminded me of Ernie Banks who, no matter how bad the Cubs performed, was always upbeat: “It’s a beautiful day. Let’s play two!”

He gave Johnny the full explanation of how rain meant that the universe was crying on Good Friday because Jesus died on the cross. But that it would clear up with spectacular sunbursts on Easter morning when he rose from the dead.

But more than Gus’s spiritual notions, his believing in us was his superpower: “Your brains, man. Ten years, you guys are gonna own this place.”

Teenagers don’t usually prop each other up like that. At least, not the ones I knew, who more often did the opposite. And probably even more than most kids that age, Frank, Johnny and I needed to be told we were worth something.

After graduation, I never saw any of them again. Frank was killed in a motorcycle accident on a Nebraska highway. Johnny, I lost track of.

And more recently, since the last I heard was that Gus was still living in the Chicago area, I did a search online. Turns out, I wish maybe I hadn't after learning he died 20 years ago.

You're gripped by a kind of guilt-singed loneliness when you lose someone you've neglected for too long. It's how I felt until, that is, I read the obituary for my high school friend.

Turns out that Gus fell in love and married Donna. They had two sons, the oldest of whom I spotted immediately in an online photo since he's a leaner spittin' image of his father.

Gus became a human resources officer at a large manufacturing corporation, but heartbreakingly succumbed to cancer at age 57 in 2005.

And though I have read countless obituary pages for many people this past century, few exceeded Gus' for the outpouring of tributes:

- Some people make this a better place while they are here; Gus did!
- Gus was so funny and entertaining and lived life to the fullest.
- I'm sure there was a special place waiting for Gus in heaven.
- Conversations full of laughter and happiness.
- His smile and calm demeanor will be greatly missed.

I needed only to read a few of the dozens of similar messages to confirm that this was the same Gus Kordik I knew.

Scientists postulate that dolphins' social nature and seeming empathy can release chemical endorphins in people who interact with them, creating a tremendous feeling of well-being. For a short but crucial period in our lives, Gus was our dolphin.

Even if you were skeptical of his quaint theories, his confidence and passion made you want to believe. Gus made you feel better about being alive in this world.

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And though Easter is a Christian holy day, it also is a celebration about feeling better about being be alive, a fresh start and hope for the future: the same ingredients in the love transfusion we received from our old friend.

Happy Easter, everyone. And wouldn't you know it — it rained on Good Friday!

David McGrath, an emeritus English professor at the College of DuPage, is the author of "Far Enough Away," a collection of Chicagoland stories. He will be inducted into the Evergreen Park Hall of Fame on May 4. Email him at mcgrathd@dupage.edu.