

Reflections of Fr. John Papallo by former patient and Chaplain Assistant/Volunteer KPPC

I first met Fr. John Papallo during my first admission as a patient at the Kings Park Psychiatric Center in March of 1985 where he was a Chaplain. His grey curly hair, broad shoulders and brown Capuchin attire, at the time I reflect reminded me of him possibly being the real Friar Tuck. He sat and spoke with me in the visitors room, kindly and reassuringly...I was very ill at the time and his kindness and compassion were appreciated. Once I was issued an honor card to go out on the grounds independently, I found my way to the Chapel with the directions he had given me on how to get to the Chapel in Building 43. Fr. John had creatively and sense of solemn spirituality set up the Chapel and on the altar stood a very large blue and white statue of the Blessed Mother. He had transformed an old cafeteria into a precious little chapel and it was special to everyone. It is here I met Dora and Agnes whom you know, who were also volunteers. The chapel was so peaceful even with the presence of any symptoms anyone might be having that day. I had not been to Mass for quite some time, but with the way the Chapel was set up, with Mary, and the way Fr. John celebrated Mass with such deep humble devotion...these surely were instrumental in me finding my way back to the Catholic Religion. After discharge, through volunteer services in October of 1985, I became a Chaplain Assistant. Not just at the chapel but with visiting patients on the wards as well. BUT once Fr. John found out about my artistic abilities I went from being a Chaplain Assistant to a somewhat reinvented Michelangelo, standing on a ladder behind the statue of Mary painting on a gold leaf paint I had suggested on the wide pillar behind Her. He knew how to put two and two together and maximize the resources available and then encourage and support them wholeheartedly to assist them to come into being. The artwork was not complete however until I found 3 bushel baskets that looked like they had been discarded on the side of the road. I wanted to use the small circular bottoms for a design on the pillar behind Mary. I did not know that they were NOT castaways until I got out of the car and picked them up. A farmer at a stand across the street started yelling that I was "stealing" his baskets. I told him I needed them for some artwork at the Kings Park Hospital Chapel. He waved me along with a generous okay.

Now I did somewhat feel the necessity to "confess" to Fr. John what might be considered "stealing". So as I told him the story he listened. There was a slight smile on my face; he could tell something humorous was on its way. Well Fr. John smiled and laughed and laughed. One knew such kind and genuine laughter with Fr. John. In time three circles were placed on the old pillar behind Mary, a dove, a chalice and a cross .I took the down in 1996 when the hospital closed, the chapel then in building 22. I gave the cross to Fr. Tom, also a Capuchin priest and the remaining two I give to you here tonight to keep in Fr. John's memory.

Regardless of diagnosis or any seriously involved history, most of the patients that came to Mass were elderly, though some came from other buildings as well...and all who came so enjoyed Fr. John's presence, spiritual comfort and reassurance, as well as his celebration of the Mass .Some patients were filled with religious delusions, unreal fears, and phobias not based on reality. He would assure them all would be okay, and explain away their concerns in the special way he did, as well as decrease the intensity of such fears. He practiced in that Chapel the true act of forgiveness in its purest light regardless of any so called wrong or harm that one had done to another because of their illness. It didn't matter what your psychiatric history was, or how dark it maybe, to Fr. John you were first a human being deserving of love, compassion and respect and to know the true peace of forgiveness

One day he told me and another chaplain assistant about a patient in the hospital who was worried about his horses and their care in his absence. So putting two and two together and knowing the other assistant had experience working with horses...well, in the dead of winter, snow on the ground, here I am walking with two full buckets of water from the house hose to the barn. We took care of the horses until the man was discharged. But in Fr. John putting two and two together I had the once in a lifetime experience to work two lippizan stallions and a mare...So two and two can equal a lot when it came to outcomes with Fr. John.

Fr. John would announce at Mass that there would be a burial at the cemetery, naming the patients name and that we were welcomed to attend. He told me where the cemetery was off Old Dock Road but I couldn't locate it. Fortunately I ran into Fr. John on his way there and he picked me up and we drove up a small winding road until we came upon a Potter's Field. The gravesite was open, maintenance workers sat at their heavy machinery waiting to close the grave, and there was the hearse. Russell was buried with dignity and respect and surely special blessings as Fr. John performed the burial rite. It was sad no family, no friends, but in all these years passed that moment remains with me.

Russell was laid to rest as so many in that field off Old Dock Road. It's a quiet comfort knowing Fr. John laid some to rest there...a special person, for a special moment, in a lifetime unknown.

Fr. John suggested a few times that I should volunteer more, to become involved in other areas of the hospital. For besides being former patient and Chaplain Assistant he knew I graduated from Columbia University School of Nursing as well as the Nurse Practitioner Program at Stony Brook University and that I had a lot to offer though I didn't realize it at the time. I had become disabled in 1982, and had lost everything. But I came to realize "I had dreams, God had plans". I am now registered volunteer for 26 years, intermittently but most consistently, at times doing art, music, and dance movement programs with the patients and became a Chaplain Assistant once again with Fr. Tom. And putting two and two together in order to maximize the outcome, I'm sure Fr. John had something to do with these years of volunteering and the humble precious memories I have gathered.

He LOVED his spaghetti.

He LOVED to share what he had with others.

He sang a MAGNIFICENT Ave Maria.

But most of all...most of all he loved God so much that he was able to share this love with others.