

“If you need anything, call me.”

“If you need anything, call me.” My dad ended many a conversation with those words of reassurance. He has always loved helping people. Maybe it was because of his modest roots that he realized the importance of being there for other people.

Born to poor Italian immigrants my dad grew up on Westside in a small home – so small that he slept in the dining room on a rollaway cot which may have led to one his great superpowers – the ability to fall asleep anywhere: including on the shelf of a closet in a hotel at the 1963 NCAA final four when Loyola won it all and even on a date with my mother. Yes, she was telling him a story when he fell asleep in the booth of the restaurant and she planned to sneak out of there while he was sleeping but she bumped him and he woke up and said, “ So how did your story end?”

He went to Presentation grammar school on Chgo’s Westside and St. Phillips High School. Fortunately for him, the priests at St. Phillips got him interested in basketball. Also, fortunately for him, there was a six feet and under league at the time. Basketball brought him closer to the Servite Priests who worked on the Westside. In fact, he felt so endeared to the Servites, that he entered the seminary to be a Servite – twice! Ultimately, he did not become a priest but instead found another route to not only serve but also have a family.

He became a Chicago police officer while continuing to coach basketball on Chicago’s Westside. At first, he coached at Our Lady of Sorrows where he coached local legend Sam Puckett as well as future NBA Champion and Hall of Famer Isiah Thomas. He was devoted to helping players like Sam and Isaiah stay off the streets. I didn’t meet Sam Puckett until decades after my father coached him, but Sam told me, “He was my father before he was yours.” If you need anything, call me.

He is that kind of guy who enjoys helping people and who believes that a good life was one spent helping people in need. He got his biggest opportunity to help people when he was to his dismay transferred on the police force to a small rural airport called Orchard Field. Don’t worry, his captain told him, this airport will be the future of this city, just wait. Not long after, the airport was renamed O’Hare Field and boy was that Captain right. My father watched O’Hare grow all around him. He loved being there for it and he loved serving people there. Famously, during the blizzard of 1967, the entire city came to a halt and so did the airport. Although when the storm started he was not at work, somehow, he found a way to get there to be with his beloved airport. He was snowed in there for three days while he helped organize policemen to shovel snow and even entertain stranded passengers in the lounge in terminal two with some singing and drinking. If you need anything, call me.

Even when not in a natural disaster, he loved to serve people – whether it was organizing an airport softball league or running the annual police golf outing, what he most wanted

was to help people enjoy themselves and make connections among people who might not have known each other. He proved to be so good at this that over the years, that he became known as the mayor of O'Hare. If anyone needed anything at O'Hare he was happy to help – from the FAA to the Airlines, to all of the law enforcement agencies there, he was the guy people came to. For him it was never about status or boasting. Many years after he retired, while I was teaching history, I came across a photo of John F Kennedy speaking at O'Hare airport and I said, hey dad, look at this picture of Kenned at O'Hare, Do you know anyone in there? And he said, yeah – that's me as he pointed to a policeman standing next to the President of the United States! He is an example of selfless service – never bragging or asking for anything in return. Many people would try to give him gifts for the favors he did but he refused them. He just wanted to help. Some of the people resorted to sending thank you gifts to the house because they knew he couldn't refuse them.

And that service extended to the O'Hare Chapel where he was involved in ministry for over 50 years. It was there that he met my mom. Together they raised my brother and I and he continued to shared his love of sports, the airport, service and connection. As my brother and I got older, he would take us to the airport and introduce us to his community there. My brother would sometimes collect the luggage carts and return them for a quarter each. As we walked through the terminal, myriad people would smile and greet him – from the shoe shiner to the shop keep to the gate agents. All would don a smile and say, "Hi Sol!" Even some of the livery drivers who he had busted respected him - like Ace and his brother Deuce. They all respected him because of the way he understood people and without judgement. I remember him telling me that when he had to arrest someone, he knew that it wasn't because that person was a bad person, but instead because of the bad inside of an otherwise good person.

And he would introduce my brother and I to the Cubs, golf, and most importantly, basketball including so many coaching friends like Bill Gleason, Ed Collins, Doug Bruno, Gene Sullivan, Ray Meyer, O'Laughlan just to name a few. His way of helping us and caring for us was often connecting us to people. But when he wasn't able to make a connection, he was ready to serve by his self. When I first moved to Japan, I was homesick and struggling. My mom told me that my dad went out to get a passport in case he needed to come help me, which is funny because I can't imagine him trying to speak Japanese or even leave the country for that matter, but he would have if he thought he could help me. He was the kind of dad who might not say much, but if you needed him to be with you in the middle of the night in the hospital, he would be there. If you need anything, call me.

And even as a grandpa, he was not often telling stories, but he loved to see his grandkids. He would quietly show up at their sports games just to see them play. And sometimes he would quietly just show up at your house for no apparent reason. But we know the reason – he wanted to simply say hi because he loves you. Livia, Serafina,

Francesca, Vincent, and Lorenzo, he loves you and will continue to love and continue to be at your games and all of your success, still quietly and still just as lovingly.

So, if you need anything, call him... And continue to be there for each other. There is nothing he would want more.