

One Man's Act of Goodness Reverberates

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By Alvin Clay III

My father turned 80 a few weeks ago. As I had lunch with him at the Lamb Tavern in Springfield, Delaware County, I listened to him retell memories of his youth. One story has always had an impact on me.

My father was born at the very beginning of the Great Depression. His father died just 18 months after it began, when my grandmother was pregnant with her fourth child. Things were tough.

When my dad was 11, he took his first job at the Bruder farm in Springfield. He worked after school and weekends for this family, which also had a little paint business – MAB Paints.

When Dad was in high school, he stopped working on the farm and started working at the paint factory. He attended West Catholic High School, where he was an athlete and an excellent student. He apparently was also an excellent worker at MAB.

One day, “Old Man Bruder” (Thomas Bruder Sr., who had taken over management of the business in 1932) called my father into his office and asked if he had ever thought about going to college. Dad said he had thought about it, but, of course, couldn’t afford to go.

“If you could go, where would you go?” Mr. Bruder asked. “I’d go to Villanova,” Dad answered. “Then go. Have them send the tuition bills and report cards to me,” the man said. “And you work out a schedule to continue working at the paint factory while you are in college.”

So Dad went to Villanova and graduated in 1951. Four years later he was back – teaching. And the rest is history. He taught at Villanova for 40 years. In 1978 he became dean of the business school and held that position until his retirement in 1995.

Along the way he touched thousands of lives. It was readily acknowledged that he was a terrific teacher – but that’s not the point I want to focus on here.

I have heard more stories than I can count as to how Dad went out of his way to help a student in trouble. Maybe they got off on the wrong foot as freshmen and were going to flunk out, but Dad “saw something in them” and gave them a chance and a plan to succeed. Maybe they were trying to transfer from another school but did have quite the right courses that Villanova demanded.

Maybe a student had trouble at home, a death in the family or an unplanned pregnancy. He made them understand that the world was not coming to an end, and that they would get through their difficulties.

He cut them breaks, gave them chances, worked out plans – and the stories of success are countless and compelling.

A few years ago, one of those students who had become very successful called the school and said he wanted to make a donation in my father's honor. When Dean Jim Danko made a few phone calls to see if anyone else was interested, he was flooded with responses – and the same stories I had been hearing for years.

Before long, there was enough money to name what is now called the Clay Center at the Villanova School of Business. It is essentially dedicated to helping business students achieve academic, personal and professional growth. It does what Dad did.

Without Tom Bruder's act of kindness in 1947, my father probably never would have gone to college. Without the many acts of kindness that Dad performed over the years, there are hundreds of people who would not have had the personal and professional success they've had. I also know that many of those same people go out of their way to help employees and colleagues through difficult periods.

The results of an act of kindness grow geometrically. It's not something we will find in our human resource manual, but it is something we can all find an opportunity to do.

Who knows how many lives we can change for the good?

Alvin A. Clay died July 22, 2012. He was 82.