

Maker Greets "His" Mobster

By Shawn Fisher

Not to long ago the prisoners at MCI Shirley put a tremendous amount of effort into converting what was once a weight-room into what is now a Christian place of worship. This 44'x48' room now resembles a chapel that would rival any in the outside world. With a handmade Altar a built in Tabernacle and pews donated from the Saint John's seminary, over 117 can sit comfortably as they listen to the Word of God.

On September 10, 2013, that capacity was to be tested as 110 prisoners and 8 volunteers showed up to celebrate the memorial of William "Billy" Barnoski. Two Inner perimeter Security (IPS) sent by Deputy Karen DiNardo to "observe" and "listen" stood outside the Chapel yet, despite the awkward assignment, both were extremely respectful and never once intruded; even as the Chapel was closing.

A little over 24 hours earlier, Billy died at the Leominster Hospital surrounded by his wife Donna and daughters Brandi, Holly and Tara. An experience very few, if not ever, have been allowed to do. For many of us this emotional and hard fought battle was at an end. Policies enacted by this administration prohibited Billy and others in the Health Services Unit (HSU), from attending religious services with their respective communities or from receiving visits from friends housed in the general population. Armed with this knowledge, we took comfort in the fact that our friend, mentor and father figure did not die alone, as so many others have and continue to do. If not for Superintendent Kelly Ryan, who made a last minute concession to allow his family to be by his bedside, this trend would have continued. However, as emotional as we were, we came together to remember a man that embodied the concept of what it means to be a "legend".

The evening started with a Communion Service presided over by Deacon Art Rogers and Billy's dear friend Shawn Fisher. The opening hymn, "Why me Lord". By Kris Kristofferson, epitomized the daily struggle we all face and was a song that was near and dear to Billy's heart. The service was dedicated to the repose of Billy's soul and to the guidance and healing of his family. The Homily given by Mike Skinner, was a reflection on the Gospel according to Luke (6: 9-12), in which Jesus chooses his 12 Apostles. He knew who they were, what they were made of and how to use them. Billy acted in a similar manner. He knew who we were before we did. He chose us, guided us and nurtured us. The service, which lasted 45 minutes, was followed by some of the men coming forward to share their memories and experiences with the man they have come to love and admire.

The first speaker was Joe Labriola, who knew Billy for over 33 years, He said that he has come to the conclusion that "Billy was put on this earth to torture the living hell out of (him)" Joe went on to say that the only reason Billy attended the programs that he did was just to "get at him". He shared the story of how he had once remarked that he, "aspired to be a Shakespearean scholar", and from that day forward it became one of his biggest regrets. Billy never once let an opportunity go by where he did not bust his chops over it. It was a humorous moment as those in attendance thought of their own experiences with Billy.

Shawn then took the stage where he reminded everyone of the letters written on Billy's behalf advocating for a medical release. He mentioned how one letter in particular, written by Billy's youngest daughter Tara, gave a picture of who he was and the impact he had on her life. In it she

called him, "the beacon for our family" and that the "love he and my mother share defies logic." She described how he held his grandson for the first time and said, "this is Gods love right here". And how he called her on the eve of her wedding night to tell her, "how proud he was of her". But the message Shawn wanted the men to get from this, was that, in spite of their surroundings, we can still have an impact on our children's lives. He asked the men, how many of them have children? Half the room raised their hands. Pausing, he went on to read Tars declaration of, "I am who I am because of my fathers undying love."

By the end, many of the men were fighting back tears. He concluded with one of Billy's favorite songs, "He stopped loving her today" by George Jones. It was a gleaming tribute to a story that seemed to inspire it.

Another dear friend, Steven James, followed with a short but very passionate take on how before he met Billy he had a razors edge and now he's just "rough around the edges". He went on to say that, "aside from his sister, he loved a Billy more than anyone in the whole world".

Frank Quinn, who loved Billy dearly, shared a quote that Billy had given to him. 'I must be willing to give up what I am in order to become what I will be'. Frank admitted that he told Billy, "this is way above my head". Billy replied, "in time you will understand it". "Slowly", Frank said. "I am starting to".

The next speaker, Ken Seguin, intimated about how he went to the HSU this past week and spoke to Billy and was amazed at where he was in his spiritual life. "Billy", he said was not afraid to die. He was afraid at what he was leaving behind. He then shared two Bible passages, Phill. 2:21,23 and 2 Cor. 5:5-8.

With a little encouragement one of the volunteers, Barbara, got up and shared a story of how when she first met him up at the max (Souza Baranowski) she was scared of him. The n one day the Lord spoke to her to go and pray over him "NO!" she shot back. "YES!" said the Lord. And so reluctantly she went over, and asked him if she could pray over him, and when she was through she said she saw tears in his eyes. "I didn't know the Billy before that moment, that everyone seems to talk about but I know the Billy after that moment and it was a true conversion".

Just before we all left the chapel, paper airplanes were passed out and on the count of three we all yelled, "YOU ARE NOW FREE BILLY!" As we flung the planes through the air. A fitting ending to a man who freed us all from ourselves.

Because of time constraints, a few others got to speak but were hurried as movement was ending. In the end, in spite of Deputy Karen DiNardo's attempt to "Ban" the event, it was a resounding success. I have had the unique distinction of organizing three memorial services her at MCI Shirley; in 2009 for Patrick O'Brien, 2011 for William "Lefty" Gilday and again in 2011 for Rocco Balliro. Each one was special in there own way but this was the most personal of all. It was the ending of a chapter that for the last 12 years he prepared me to compose. I can only hope that when we meet again in paradise I will have made him proud. He made me the man I am today and without him I would not have the hope for the future that he was so instrumental in providing.