



Friday Night [under the] Lights

2013

It's Friday.

A tough one at that...

As this issue hits your mailbox, with the backdrop of the setting sun on gorgeous Mission Bay in San Diego, a whole bunch of us from all over the country are gathering to celebrate the life of one of our own...

As you probably know by now, Kurt Williams, our wonderful friend, trusted colleague and one of EMS' Finest, died unexpectedly in his sleep the Sunday before last. *It's devastated all of us.*

Things like this really shake our sense of wellbeing. Never, in a million years, did I expect to hear the news about Kurt that Sunday morning. It messed me up.

I spent the rest of the day in a fog. I kept thinking about Kurt – things he did, things he talked about, the way he did things and, of course, a ton of his funny stories (and BOY, did he have some funny stories).

Then it would strike me (hard) that he was gone.

And I would get acutely sad and try to figure out how something like that could happen. All the "what – ifs". All the back-tracking – "did he have anything we should know about"? Had he been sick?

And when you're in medicine (as most of you know), when there's no definitive or obvious answer, it becomes even harder to rationalize something like this.

It's been a tough time for many across the country who were fortunate enough to spend a little of the Journey with Kurt.

You know, when someone we love and care for dies, we, as human beings, go through a well-studied and predictable series of phases to cope with and recover from the intense sadness and emptiness death creates. It's what helps us continue on with our own lives.

I know you've heard this before from me, but it's really, really important in times like this (I'm talking to myself as much as you all, by the way)...

My dad the Minister (here we go) always helped me get the right perspective on things I just couldn't seem to understand. I've told this story before in FNuL – I think its relevant now for all of us as we try and make sense of losing a friend...

My dad married me, my brother, my sister, (yes, that does sound odd when I read it back) - he did my college and medical school graduation ceremonies, he did countless baptisms, weddings, funerals and other assorted blessings throughout his career. At one point, when I was in high school, he was getting ready to do a yet another funeral for a member of the church.

Of all the ceremonies he did, I asked him if he just *dreaded* doing funerals because of how sad they were, how devastated and empty people felt and just because they were so "terminal". Everyone cries. Things seem so emotionally lost.

What he said has always stuck with me. He said that, to the contrary, funerals were probably his *most precious* ceremony and the event he felt he could impact the most people.

I thought he was nuts. He was just trying to make me feel good.

But he reminded me that a funeral or memorial was a *celebration* of a person's life – a review of all their wonderful accomplishments. Funerals were a time to honor and recognize the person that brought everyone together. They were an opportunity to firmly solidify exactly how much someone had meant to us, what we learned from them and how we changed our own lives because of them.

Funerals bring people together that are often only acquaintances or friends because of the person they're coming to pay respects to. If not for our friend, many of US would have never had the chance to become friends...

When someone near and dear to us dies, we have an opportunity to grab some of the gifts they gave us and carry them with us forever. That's what I'm doing right now.

I don't do too well when people close to me die. I'd be lying to you if I told you I didn't have quite a few tearful episodes just crafting this note.

But my dad's gift to me (one of them) was what he taught me about losing someone we love.

So, with that, I want to take a personal liberty tonight and share a few gifts I got from Kurt Williams along my short Journey with him...



- Kurt had an absolutely brilliant sense of humor. His delivery was perfect and he always used humor to help calm the discomfort of challenging circumstances. He is one of the best “straight faced” humorists around. There were literally hundreds of times that I would pause and wonder if he was serious or not. He’d slip out that crooked smile and you knew exactly what he was doing. His gift was reminding us how comforting humor can be even in the midst of utter chaotic turmoil...
- Kurt worried about details, even when no one else knew. I can’t tell you the number of times we would all be talking about a strategic approach to something, or a communication, or building out a National Medical Command Center... Inevitably, something “little” would come up. While most of us would say “don’t worry about that insignificant stuff”, he would. It’s why the National Medical Command Center first impression was so powerful to our colleagues in Bosch Healthcare. It’s why he would jot down a little note when he made a promise to someone at a dinner meeting or he would send me a note reminding me of a commitment we made and “where the hell are we going with it, Doc Roc”? I remember he spilled coffee on his shirt before a meeting with the leadership of CareMore in California. If he buttoned his jacket, no one would ever see it – But for Kurt, he knew it was there – and that bugged him (no one but us ever noticed, but we certainly made a big deal out of it). His gift was reminding us that details do matter, even when no one’s looking...

- Kurt knew that great things only happened because great people made it so. He cherished people and their accomplishments. He loved to tell stories about what others had done and the impact it made. He would often ask “have you ever heard of so and so and what they did with such and such”? He used that talent to bring together many people from vastly different backgrounds. He was a really, really good matchmaker. His gift to us was to remind us how important the person is to the successes they create...
- Kurt was extraordinarily proud of what he did and how he did it (see above) without ever being boastful or arrogant. I remember when I first walked into his office in Las Vegas several years ago, it was like a museum. He had photos, plaques, letters and artifacts from all sorts of fantastic events he had been a part of. I remember making some comment about how cool it was and he just poo-pooed it as just another bunch of “stuff” that he’d collected. Not even a hint of anything anywhere on the same planet as a brag. But the way he had them displayed, and the quality of the recognition made it very apparent that he was extremely proud - *and well he should be*. His gift to us was to show us the art of expressing pride without any sense of arrogance or selfishness. To prove my point further, last year, Kurt was deployed to Mississippi during one of our FEMA activations. He spent countless hours at the Command Post and, as part of his responsibilities, he was “deputized” by local law enforcement officials. One night while we were all travelling in Dallas, he showed us the badge outside a hotel. I thought it was one of the coolest things, so I took a picture. Kurt asked me not to include it in any FNuL because he didn’t want to be perceived as boasting or bragging about what had happened. He was clearly proud, but didn’t want to be perceived as some big shot with a badge... *I want to show you how proud he was now.*



- Kurt was *always, always, always* willing to help however he could, whenever he was needed and whoever needed him. In the last year alone, he was named COO of the newly formed Evolution Health, stepped in for our FEMA deployments, helped re-align the entire northeast region of AMR when it needed some help and was STILL willing to assist anyone that rang him up... His gift to us was showing us the rewards and the value of servant leadership. Whether it was within AMR, the American Ambulance Association or his with his professional friends, he's the one to blame when someone would say, "Hey! Call Kurt."
- Finally, and perhaps most importantly, *Kurt lived life*. He enjoyed (usually) work. He loved to travel. He loved exploring new things. He enjoyed the finer things life has to offer and he took every opportunity to live this life to the fullest (I mean, buy a roundtrip ticket to Zurich for lunch in December just to maintain your Platinum Exec status – Really?). That was Kurt. Seems to me that he really enjoyed his Journey. A lot. His gift to us - and this is perhaps the most important one of all - *enjoy the ride*. Every chance you get. His death reminds us how much life means. I'm grateful to him for that message...

I'm still unbelievably sad, but I feel better when I look at the gifts I got and I remember the things he did to make us all better. This past week, his lifelong buddy Sharon Henry (who he adored) and I texted each other during a particularly funny moment of a challenging meeting that it was a "KM".

A Kurt Moment.

Thanks for the gifts, Kurt.

That's it from my world. Now I can say it, right? *Happy Friday. Happy* because we get to celebrate our friend and talk about all the gifts he gave us.

Ed

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