

The Legacy of Jim McEntee

By Richard Hobbs

We can all learn from the legacy and character of Jim McEntee, long-time Director of the Office of Human Relations who died suddenly on September 13, 2004. Jim was fatherly, fun, forgiving, faithful, a friend, and a fighter for social justice.

Fatherly

Not only was Jim McEntee a Roman Catholic Father early in his career, but he emanated pastoral concern and provided fatherly counsel to hundreds and hundreds of people during his career.

Aside from being the actual father to nine lucky children, Jim always made himself available to actively listen and provide fatherly advice. He mentored an entire generation of community leaders in Santa Clara County and beyond.

Fun

Jim's wry wit, uncanny jokes, unusual work ethic, fearless awe in addressing new situations, and sparkling laughter created a relaxed atmosphere that allowed people to express themselves naturally with a high comfort level.

I recall when Jim hired me 8 years ago. It was a Sunday evening at midnight and for some crazy reason I just happened to be at work as director of the Catholic Charities Immigration Program. He called me to leave me a message when I picked up the phone and said "Richard Hobbs here". There was stunned silence before Jim spoke in complete surprise. He clearly did not anticipate anyone picking up the phone. Later we laughed hard about that exchange. He told me, "When you answered the phone at midnight I knew I had the right guy."

Forgiving

Jim McEntee more than anyone I have ever known saw only good in everyone. Some may criticize Jim for not criticizing others, but I believe if we reflect deeply we can recognize a quality in Jim that places the unrealized potential of human beings in a category by itself, above that of other species.

Jim recognized that we are all flawed, we are all frail, and we are all failures in different areas of our lives, but we are the product of circumstances beyond ourselves and we all deserve forgiveness. How can you criticize persons for circumstances beyond their individual control?

Jim was a pastoral sociologist who cared passionately and forgave freely because he knew that blaming others would not create a world of love and opportunity that could meet the human needs of all. This does not mean that he was not a sincere and active critic of structural flaws such as exploitation, discrimination, patriarchy, and homophobia.

One of Jim's favorite expressions was "Better to ask forgiveness than to ask permission." When he felt he had to pursue this path, which was not often, this caused concern among many in County government, where permission is understandably highly valued.

When I reflect on this expression and on Jim's life, I think that there are very few individuals who could survive the practice of seeking forgiveness instead of permission. Jim was able to ask forgiveness ex post facto after breaking minor rules or avoiding minor protocol because of his profound moral compass and deep grounding in human rights.

He knew that feeding or housing that homeless person in front of him or immediately addressing a deep emotional scar left from discrimination or indifference was paramount. And he was right.

Faithful

Jim McEntee was faithful to his family, to his community, and to his religious beliefs. But more importantly, he was faithful to himself. As Jim's lifelong friend Rigo Chacon told me, Jim knew that the main person you have to feel good with in your life is that person you see in the mirror when you get up in the morning.

Jim McEntee was unflinchingly faithful to his beliefs. To paraphrase Mahatma Gandhi, he lived the world he sought to create. He practiced the better future he wanted for all of us. He worked tirelessly to create the beloved community advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King.

Friend

Jim McEntee was a friend to all, a man without enemies. He is truly the only person I know of who was not disliked by anyone. How many people can say this about themselves? Jim's honest, open, collaborative, attentive, and compassionate style exuded friendliness. After meeting Jim McEntee for the first time most people I know felt that they had a close friend for life. This was equally true for the poor, the peer, and the powerful. In Jim McEntee they felt they had a lifelong friend. And they did.

Jim abhorred conflict but excelled at resolving conflict, mediating countless community disputes and personal enmities. Perhaps a postscript to his life that we all need to ponder might be "Why can't people just get along?" Jim was the community mediator par excellence in Santa Clara County for three decades.

I spoke to Jim upon more than one occasion about changing the name of the Office of Human Relations to the Office of Humane Relations. We in OHR don't simply seek relations between human beings, but rather emphasize the character and quality of those relations. He liked the idea. To emphasize caring and humane relations, in Jim's name, I suggest the name change.

Fighter

Jim McEntee abhorred inequality, racism, and prejudice of any stripe. He had a deep understanding of people's needs and worked 24-7 to meet those needs. He was a lifelong advocate and fighter for human rights.

Jim played a major role in creating community based organizations that have helped hundreds of thousands of residents of Santa Clara County. These include the Second Harvest Food Bank, the Emergency Housing Consortium, Asian Law Alliance and the shelter program at the armories.

At one point during a budget crisis the personnel in the Office of Human Relations was reduced to Jim alone. Recognizing the need to improve community relations and meet the needs of the disadvantaged, Jim worked hard to create programs in the Office of Human Relations to help disputing parties, women, immigrants, victims of hate, and youth.

Jim often used the metaphor of the turtle that has to stick his head out in order to take a few steps forward. Jim, thank you for sticking your neck out on behalf of immigrants in Santa Clara County, taking those steps forward.

You helped provide immigrants with needed services, made sure immigrants could be citizens and therefore full-fledged members of the community, shared their pain after Sept. 11, sought to make county government culturally proficient, and committed yourself to enhance diversity in ways that were celebratory and respectful of immigrant contributions, not merely tolerant.

The Legacy

Jim McEntee lived a vibrant and loving life. He lived it simultaneously on many levels. He was the kind friend who provided a bowl of soup and actively listened to the homeless visitor to OHR, or offered help to the janitor's daughter. He was the institutional advocate who tried to make government work for the locked out, or create a new community agency to meet a pressing need. He was the marcher for social justice who followed in the footsteps but also paved the way for such peers as Cesar Chavez.

Jim McEntee. Fatherly and fun. Forgiving and faithful. Friend and fighter. We miss you, Jim.