

Quick, Timely Reads
On the Waterfront

Connections and Inspiration
*From West Fourth Street to Polk State and
L'Arche*

By David Frew
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Dr. David Frew, a prolific writer, author, and speaker, grew up on Erie's lower west side as a proud "Bay Rat," joining neighborhood kids playing and marauding along the west bayfront. He has written for years about his beloved Presque Isle and his adventures on the Great Lakes. In this series, the JES Scholar-in-Residence takes note of life in and around the water.

*'Dragons live forever but not so little boys.
Painted wings and giant's rings give way to other toys.
Then one gray day it happened, Jackie Paper came no more,
And Puff the magic dragon ceased his mighty roar.
Head bent down in sorrow his green scales fell like rain,
Puff no longer went to play along the Cherry Lane.'*
-- **from "Puff the Magic Dragon," by Peter Yarrow**



David Nathal in about 1943.

In recent months I have written Jefferson essays involving the Nathal family, the Detroit Tigers, and opera fans who lived in the house across the street from me while growing up on West Fourth Street. Those articles put me in touch with Mary Beth Paul, daughter of one of the nine Nathal children, Gloria. The first line in one of the essays was “wonderful family,” an overwhelming memory that I have of the Nathals. Neighbors watched in astonishment as nine kids grew and thrived in a modest home. The cohesiveness and love of the Nathal’s Italian family would not surprise anyone familiar with Italian culture, but for me back then (before I married into an Italian family, myself) it was an amazing lesson. Conversations with Mary Beth have helped reinforce that reality. Nathal kids and extended families have continued to care for each other, even under the most difficult circumstances. Perhaps the most stunning example of this is evidenced by the life of David Nathal, the family’s youngest child.

David was a constant presence in my life when I was a youngster. He was a few years older, but I liked him, and we became friends. We played catch with baseballs or footballs and shot baskets at the neighborhood court. Dave was the Detroit Tigers savant that I mentioned in an earlier article. While he was a special education student and had difficulty with traditional academics, he attended school, learned to read and write, and could rattle off almost any baseball statistic no matter how obscure. Batting and fielding data going back decades, pitching ERAs, and overall season win-loss records going back decades were all part of his repertoire, especially for Detroit Tigers players. He had been to actual major league games and listened to countless others on the radio. David could recreate exciting play-by-play details in amazing detail, adding pitch counts when home runs were hit and more. Knowing David Nathal was like having continuous access to one of the era’s great baseball announcers.

When he was only 5 years old, David suffered a very high fever that left him with permanent brain damage. While I never witnessed any problems, myself, David experienced mood swings and mental illness issues. I did not understand the

ramifications, but my parents were concerned about the time that we spent together. Since he was older and we attended different schools, David did not become one of my regular, adventure-seeking Bay Rat buddies. I was already drifting away from him when the second of his parents passed away. His mom died when he was only 11 and his father a few years later in 1957 when he was 17. Neighbors wondered what would become of David since it did not seem that he would be able to live independently but his sister, Gloria (Mary Beth's mother), who had married and moved into an upstairs flat two doors west of my house, took him in. At about the time that David's father passed away, Gloria and her husband Ed Pilewski had moved from the neighborhood and bought a house. When they were preparing their new home, Gloria's husband built a dedicated, first-floor bedroom for David so that he would be able to live with them.

After that, Dave stopped wandering about the neighborhood as he had when he was living at his family home. He also found a job at a candy store where he commuted each day on a city bus. One of my last significant times with Dave happened in 1957 and I remember it as if it were yesterday. I was with three neighborhood friends playing basketball behind the apartment house across the street when Dave suddenly showed up with Johnny Modica. Johnny was the neighborhood superstar athlete, having played football at Edinboro after a stint in the Korean War. He had married and was living with his wife in his mother's home next door at the time. Johnny, whose mother was the sister of David Nathal's mother, must have heard the basketball game and responded by showing up, accompanied by David. He and David had been sitting in his mother's kitchen with several of David's brothers and sisters just before he arrived.

Johnny, who was 27 years old and completing his final year of college, suggested playing a game of three-on-three and offered to take both Dave Nathal and myself as teammates. My reaction to the "teams" was that we were about to be slaughtered. I was not the best of the original four neighborhood players and while David Natal was tall, he was neither quick nor athletic. Happily, I could not have been more wrong. Johnny Modica was so good and such a skilled passer that we won easily. With the opposing team collapsing on him, Johnny sent amazing passes to both Dave and me when we were in a position to score easy layups.



Polk State had the ominous appearance of a Victorian Era mental hospital. Its original mission statement was to provide a home for the "feeble-minded."

It is now apparent that Johnny had taken David away from the Modica kitchen so that his brothers and sisters could discuss their plans for him. David's father had just passed away and Gloria was about to move David from his family home to her new house. Lots of important decisions were made in the Modica kitchen over the years and this was one of them.

A year after that basketball game, I learned that David had left Gloria's home. He was sent to Polk State School and Hospital. After agonizing over the decision to institutionalize him, David's brothers and sisters decided (with recommendations from priests and psychologists) that it was the best possible course of action. David Nathal spent 16 years at Polk, during an era when the population was in excess of 3,000. Beyond overcrowded. He had a responsible kitchen job and even though he had been labeled as "high-functioning," David was subjected to terrible chemical regimens as well as electro-shock therapy. Siblings continued to be attentive during those years, bringing him home for every holiday and sharing the objective of getting him away from Polk often. They took him to baseball games, on shopping trips, and to their houses for holidays. But between visits David was clearly suffering.

Like Johnny Paper in "Puff the Magic Dragon," I became distracted. I knew that my friend had been sent to Polk, but I never forgot about him. College, marriage, children, jobs, and graduate school in Ohio captured my attention. But visits home, talking to Mrs. Modica, and seeing the former Nathal house always reminded me of David and I wondered. Somehow, the Peter, Paul, and Mary song (Puff) that my children and I enjoyed, always reminded me of him. Not that he was a dragon. But because of my own distractions. I was Johnny Paper and every time I heard the song, I was transported back to Fourth Street, and guilt over losing touch with my old friend.

Reports from Mrs. Modica over the years were not optimistic. David had suffered at Polk. And his brothers and sisters were tortured with worry. He developed Parkinson's, shook badly, continued to have panic episodes, and missed his former life on Fourth Street. But he was still there. Somewhere.



Erie's L'Arche became the first American site for the organization and has grown steadily since its founding.

In 1970, Gannon hired me to return to Erie and run its new MBA Program. My next-door office mate was a lovely Benedictine nun, Sister Barbara Karznia. One of Sister Barbara's frequent visitors was Father George Strohmeyer and I eventually learned that the two of them were planning an amazing and ambitious venture. Barbara and George, with almost no resources, were creating the first American L'Arche community in Erie. After its birth in France, L'Arche had "spread" to North America, beginning in Canada, the home of the founder.



David Nathal helps out at a family reunion after returning to Erie.

Memories of David Nathal as well as lyrics from “Puff the Magic Dragon” rattling through my head inspired me to volunteer to help. I offered consulting skills to help organize the new home and its operations. Then one day after L’Arche Erie had been successfully operating, George Strohmeier mentioned a new resident who would like to see me, and I was stunned to learn that it was David Nathal. He had been liberated from Polk by the Dr. Gertude A. Barber Center (now Barber National Institute) and by Barbara and George, and was living just a few blocks from Gannon. The early 1970s had brought change to Polk as many residents were being released and mainstreamed. David began at the Barber Center in Erie and later moved to L’Arche.



David Nathal with Mary Beth Paul’s infant son, Peter, who is being held by her sister, Ann.

I went to see David immediately, not knowing what to expect. Father Strohmeier arranged for us to have lunch at the L’Arche home and David was amazing. We talked for more than two hours that day, recalling West Fourth Street, his family, the Modicas, and more. When I asked if he was still a Detroit Tigers fan, he regaled me details of recent games and told me of how he had been to several that year with his brothers and sisters. It was as if no time had passed. Same old Dave. The mission of L’Arche was to mainstream adults with physical and intellectual disabilities by using a radical new living approach in which residents lived and worked communally to make their housework. L’Arche also had (and still has) a Christian-Catholic core that ministered to the spiritual development of residents. Both of these L’Arche operating principles suited David well because he was a good cook, specializing in Italian cuisine, and had grown up in a Catholic-Italian family environment. He and I talked many times during his L’Arche years, and especially about his gardening prowess. His specialty was basil, the “secret ingredient” in so many Italian dishes.

David lived at L’Arche for 16 years and I saw him regularly. Sadly, health issues caught up with him and he had to leave L’Arche for specialized care. His final weeks, which were both sad and inspirational, are best described by Mary Beth

Paul in a note that she sent to me:

“Members of the L’Arche community faithfully sat with David for the final weeks before he passed away at the young age of 60. Then at the Mass of Resurrection at St. Andrew Church in 2000, the entire L’Arche community escorted his body into the church. It was inspirational to see a packed church at the funeral of a man who might otherwise have been passed over as insignificant. Instead, David Nathal touched the lives of, and was well-loved by so many.”



David Nathal, second from left, poses with the brothers and sisters who cared for him. From left are his siblings Alderic, Gloria (Mary Beth Paul’s mother), Ventrina, Victor, Coletta, and Delphina. Dolores and Ralph had passed away.

This article with details of the life of my friend, David Nathal, was inspired by Mary Beth Paul, David’s niece and the daughter of Gloria Nathal Pilewski. Mary Beth and I began communicating about the Matt Nathal article, “Field of American Dreams,” and she eventually shared an essay that she had written about her uncle. Somehow her Uncle David and other life events inspired her to pursue a career in which she worked at several group homes, including L’Arche Syracuse, after earning a degree in special education. I am grateful for the chance to write about my friend David, the Nathal Family, and Johnny Modica.

Sister Barbara Karznia died unexpectedly in 1982, but Father George Strohmeier is still at Gannon and working with L’Arche.

My daughter, Cheryl, worked at L’Arche during her college years and fell in love with the organization. When she married, we invited the L’Arche community to the wedding and reception and David Nathal was among the guests.

ACCIDENTAL PARADISE
13,000-Year History of Presque Isle



By David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak

with

*Dr. Jerry Covert, Cheryl Heeseman, Brian Gula, Harry Leslie, Dr. John Lyons,
Bob North, and Dr. Jeanette Schwarz*

JESERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY PUBLICATION

The beautiful book on Presque Isle recently published by authors David Frew and Jerry Skrypzak – “**Accidental Paradise: 13,000-Year History of Presque Isle**” – is on sale at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center’s gift shop and through a special website, AccidentalParadise.com.

The book, priced at **\$35 plus tax and shipping**, can be ordered now through the website sponsored by the TREC Foundation, AccidentalParadise.com.

Presque Isle Gallery and Gifts on the main floor of TREC, located at **301 Peninsula Drive, Suite #2, Erie, PA 16505** will also handle sales *daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.*

For more information, send an email to aperino@TREC.org.

To watch "Accidental Paradise: Stories Behind The Stories" click [here](#).

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Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management



consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.

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