

June 2019

Forum

Ventura Unit 547

Jody Shapiro with assist from Bob Gruber and Peggy Nielsen.

On Sunday May 19, Unit 547 lost Tom Ciacio. We were devastated by the news of his death.

We all had so much respect for Tom...for the evenhandedness of his officiating, his attention to details of managing our Unit, his kindness to new players and his always going the extra mile beyond any official duties to help us in so many ways. While it was true that he kept private, his personal life, his public face revealed much of who he was. And he was very bright, quick with his dry wit, and in his personal modesty, was uncomfortable being praised.

So many stories have come forward this week since his passing and we think it's important to share some them to get a measure of the man who wanted to keep out of the spotlight, to do his job well, and to do it without a lot of fanfare and falderol.

Maurine Moore recounted the time she had inadvertently left her car lights on, and when the game was over and she left the building to drive home, she couldn't start her car. AAA was called and as she waited and waited, the hour growing late, Tom saw her dilemma. He brought his car around, jump started her car for her, and was just closing her car hood, when the repair truck finally arrived.

Susan Lang shared that the special Theme games brought Tom the extra pleasure of seeing the larger than normal Saturday turnouts. But there was always extra clean-up at the end of the afternoon. She and Tom were left with the cleanup chores that included vacuuming the room. They always parted with a hand-shake, "atta-boy atta girl" sense of success. Susan says that she never knew "that vacuuming could be so cathartic."

Susan also said she grew to love the teasing they tossed between themselves. She said, "Once you were able to crack that outside wall he built around himself, you were rewarded handsomely with a wonderful, generous, caring man who few knew. I was fortunate to have slipped through that crack often."

Joan Cathcart also enjoyed being the recipient of Tom's banter. It happened that once her masterpoints were allocated incorrectly to someone named Josephine. Tom was able to get her points restored but forever after, she said, "on Wednesdays, he would greet me as Josephine, Judy, Janet, Jacqueline, or his favorite, Jezebel. My name Joan became lost in his vocabulary. Sometimes he shortened his greeting to 'Who are you?' Henceforth, I will be *me* again, but I will miss being all those other J ladies."

So often, new players feel intimidated by the experienced players who sometimes forget what it felt like when they themselves first encountered the competitive culture of duplicate bridge. One of our newer players, Jo Anne Wedding, said that Tom was "constantly welcoming, cheerful, courteous, and frequently humorous."

When Perry and I began playing duplicate, Tom cautioned us, “Never try to bid your partner out of a bad contract.” Forevermore when we play, we try to remember and apply the “Ciaccio Rule.”

Anne Cline says that Tom probably is the reason she has continued to play. She relates that “In 2012 I came back to bridge after 20 years. I was very apprehensive (had never seen a bidding box!) and at first I played with Ilona's ‘workshop’ group on Tuesdays. After a few months I decided to join the open game. The very first time I played in the open game one of the players was extremely nasty to me. Tom noticed, took me aside, and said ‘_____ must have gotten out of the wrong side of bed this morning. _____ isn't usually that bad. Don't take it personally!’ His kindness at that critical time was enough to keep me playing.”

Floyd Richards told about the time that when he was active as a director, the club had switched to the electronic Bridge Mates. He found the new electronics challenging and difficult until Tom, with infinite patience, helped him learn how to manage them. So many people were grateful to Tom for his willingness to guide them into the mysteries of computer technology that has become so important to the management of duplicate games. But then, after all, Tom was a graduate of MIT, and he probably never met a computer problem he couldn't solve.

We had an email from seasonal club visitors, Sally and Gary Van Valin, who wrote that hearing about Tom hurts all the way to New Mexico. They said that Tom was “irrepressible cheerful” to them and extend their condolences to all of us.

What we learned in talking to people about Tom, were some of his hobbies and likes and dislikes. Peggy Nielsen, who probably knew Tom better than any of the other Unit members, said that Tom hated avocados, loved eating at Lure in Camarillo, was himself, a creative cook who made a mean risotto (he once told someone he was of Sicilian descent so not to mess with him). He loved history and visiting museums, and attended live theater. He followed all the Vandenberg missile launches and enjoyed “stupid movies” especially if accompanied by very buttery popcorn.

What we also know is that Tom Ciaccio was one of a kind. He left the East Coast for California in 1996, and never looked back. His wife, Jane, passed away in January, 2007, and then, soon afterwards, he also lost his bridge partner, Jack Hellner. It was after those two personal tragedies, that he had the opportunity to take early retirement, and to begin a whole new career as a bridge director. Arleen Harvey, who is currently an Associate National Tournament Director for ACBL, met and began working with Tom when he became part of the ACBL directing team in 2014. She said Tom cared and made a huge effort to run player-centered games.

We know that Tom directed not only for our Unit's games, but was much sought after in Santa Barbara, and also in Thousand Oaks. But we always thought of Tom as “ours”. And forever shall he remain so. Rest in Peace, Tom. We will miss you terribly.