

Ken Gohr, The First Turtle Pledge and my "Brother"

by John Sladek '65, , Turtle President '63-64, '64-65

Ken Gohr grew up in Berwyn Illinois and with his parents and two sisters, Ruth and Marilyn, attended Berwyn United Lutheran Church. His parents sang in the choir and we all attended Sunday School. Ken graduated from Morton High School in Cicero and moved on to Carthage College where he studied Business and then Theology. I met Ken through church in the 1950's and took an instant liking to him. He had a great sense of humor, loved sports activities and had a real interest in my oldest sister Joanne who he eventually married in the summer of 1955 while they were still students at Carthage. I remember the first time Ken came over to our home on South Wesley Avenue to pick up Joanne for a date. His hair was slicked back in a fashionable DA (all the rage in those days) and the mufflers on his souped up 1940 Ford Convertible drove my Dad a bit nuts, or at least it didn't instill a spirit of confidence in either Ken or his "wheels." But Ken loved cars and through the years always had one or two around that were special. His two proudest perhaps were his deep maroon '47 Caddy convertible and his hot rod '51 Ford with dual carbs and a tricked out interior that he drove through Oak Park on calls when he served as Pastor of the local Lutheran Church. He was quite a sight in his clerical garb driving his snow white Ford Coupe running through the gears.

Ken was in the class of the first Turtle Pledges in 1953 when Tau Sigma Chi began as a "service club" on campus. Following the return of veterans from World War II the college leadership decided to prohibit fraternities, but eventually saw the wisdom in chartering the Turtles, the oldest among Carthage's many fraternities and the "best of all of the rest." Ken and his brothers really paved the way for fraternities to return to Carthage. They were a fun group, active in college activities from theater to intramurals and were respected for their contributions through their many service activities. They also promoted social activities that pursuit today. My family visited Ken and Joanne many times during their years at Carthage and each time I grew closer to Ken and to the college. It seemed inevitable that I too would attend Carthage even though my other sister Barbara decided to head to ISU in Bloomington instead of joining the large number of Lutherans from Berwyn and Cicero who were Carthaginians. I attended Glenbrook High School (now Glenbrook North) where the expectation was to head to a great research university, particularly Ivy League. During my senior year I won an Illinois State Scholarship which meant automatic admission to any college or university in the state. After much thought I chose Carthage and am honored to give Ken and a few others (Barb's husband George Zima also is an alum and a member of our same church) credit for influencing my decision. And the fact that Ken was a Turtle and that I had so much fun with the Turtles during campus visits made it easy to decide.

I used to wish, during grade and high school, that I had an older brother who could have paved the way for certain "rights of passage" with my Dad as I was growing up so when Ken became a member of the family and officially my brother-in-law he really became my brother. I cherished that relationship. We shared a lot together and I could always count on him to provide good advice and help me through some tough decisions. And we had good times together, especially with our special cars and on the tennis court where he usually won. He was competitive yet yielding and had a compassion for others that likely drove him to the ministry and subsequently to take a leave of absence from his church during the Viet Nam war to enlist as a Navy Chaplain and serve in the war zone. Those were difficult times in America with a divided nation and as a young, long haired student at Northwestern

University Medical School I found myself in the thick of protest and dissatisfaction with the politics and policies of the times. Interesting, Ken and I did not disagree on the war, it's just that he decided to help the young soldiers who found themselves in the midst of the battles, and he did so very well. He served with honor and a purposeful mission and remained a part of Navy life thereafter.

I lived with Ken and his family for a year while in graduate school and during that time we shared many good times together although our schedules often didn't overlap well. And our love of cars prevailed so much so that he surprised me with a 1953 Pontiac one Wednesday morning to drive as my winter car during 1966 for the commute to Northwestern from Oak Park. Normally, one would be pretty excited about such a find, after all it was a one owner, low mileage sedan that one of his parishioners no longer was able to drive. So he woke me on that early morning, announced that he had something for me to see and urged me to get moving. You have to realize that during that semester I had no classes on Wednesday's so this was my morning to sleep in...and the night before I had spent several hours at Uno's with Turtles John Gavurnik and Herb Tallitsch, and my high school friend Bill Kennedy of Northbrook who was a personal friend of the owners. Coincidentally, it was the owners birthday and his mother had sent a rum cake from Italy so at midnight Rudy closed Uno's to the public and we stayed and enjoyed the cake, several more rounds of shots and beers, and eventually left around 3am. Understandably when Ken woke me the next morning around 7 and said "let's go for a ride" I responded sluggishly (I'm surprised I responded at all) and with a monster headache. But we took that old straight eight sedan for a test drive and when I noticed that the front shocks were shot and the car was pitching like a rowboat on 10 foot Lake Michigan waves I got very close to losing it! But Ken, who was smiling and giving me a sales pitch the whole time, failed to notice that I was showing Turtle green (not clothes, my face) and kept on driving and we kept on pitching. And I kept thinking this way God's way, through one of his clerics, to keep me in check. It worked, I bought the car and hoped to return the favor, but he never put himself in harms way. And I've only been green once or twice since.

Ken eventually left the ministry, divorced and remarried, moved to Southern California and started life anew. We moved to Rochester New York in 1973 and eventually back to Illinois and then on the mountains of Colorado. Time and distance got in the way of day to day activities with Ken, but we remained in touch and close friends. I hadn't seen Ken since our 50th reunion in Kenosha in 2003, but in 2007 he and one of his three daughters, Lisa, visited us at California Lutheran University.....and like so many reunions it was like old times. The stories of life at Carthage flowed freely and he was the same Ken I remembered from the 50's, great sense of humor, open and transparent, and caring. Ken passed last summer and we all miss his spirit of optimism and compassion.

Thanks for being my Brother Ken.

John Sladek