



March 19, 2010

Dear Friends:

JOeY

No, that's not a misprint. It's just that I've been sitting here looking at a blank page realizing that JOY was 3/4's of Joey's name. Joey Winters walked into every room and into every life and brought the joy with him. And, the memory of that joy has been the pilot light of our brightest moments these last few days.



The memories come from every corner, from students who were chided to stand straight and sing correctly, from some of his "high brow" music colleagues, from congregants who marveled and received blessing week after week, from the group of little ladies who always commended the latest outfit, from the Starbuck's employees who are already missing his every morning bright smile, Joey's influence was vast.

We all know about the music gift but many didn't realize that another special gift had subtly entrapped them without even knowing what had happened. Joey made everybody think that they were his best friend or favorite student. It was just a God-gift.

Personally, my Joey journey lasted well over 30 years and thousands of miles along the way. We shared vast, now treasured, experiences in front of crowds from 35,000 to 3 while never missing an opportunity to have laughs and good food in the process.

It was a difficult 2005 day when, after the stupid storm scattered us, it was my lot to tell Joey that home was gone. On that tough day, Joey's response was loving, gracious but faith filled. He said, "I'm believing that God will help us to quickly get back together." It took longer than we all had hoped.

During his time away, he would call our house nearly every Sunday afternoon. Somewhere between 5 and 7pm, the phone would ring and one of us would shout out, "Get it, it's Joey!" Everybody wanted to say hi and after seeing how we were doing and after some mutual commiserating, the conversation always went to, "Big Bro, when can I get back home?" I remember the January '08 day when I finally got to say, "Hey, let's do this thing". I knew he was anxious to get back but it seemed like I had just hung up the phone and he was in my living room.

Although Joey knew he was coming back to only a dimming semblance of past experience, he also knew it was now a new forward adventure that was not going back to the death and desolation we had been delivered from. Joey fully concurred, joyfully embraced the vision and jumped in with both feet. Make that, all ten fingers.

It was a fun time to see the new LifeGate members who were getting to see the "Joey Experience" for the first time. Whether it was the unique pair of green shoes or the Easter Sunday pink hat, he always managed to keep our attention. But soon, even the new folks realized what we already knew,

that was just for fun and his blazing gift of music and worship was far brighter than his favorite Christmas tie.

Over the last four or five Sunday's, it was apparent that Joey had hit a new zone of worship and joy and it had not gone unnoticed. From his public exhortations and prayers and playing better than ever, times were good.

Until last Sunday Night.

The memory of the mournful Monday that followed will stay with us for a long time but we know that Joseph Bernard Winters would be challenging us to keep moving forward, to rejoice, to raise our worship to a higher level. He would challenge us to stand tall, work harder and keep smiling in the process.

Late Monday afternoon, while sitting on the couch with Linda, our tears were interrupted as her phone sounded the calendar reminder . . . MONDAY, 3PM, PIANO LESSON . . . Joey was supposed to be there with us but it would not happen.

30 minutes later, now out on the road, I picked up my phone and dialed Joey's number. Knowing how he loved his gadgets, especially his iPhone, I knew, as it rang, a crazy picture of me was on the ID screen. (I found out late Tuesday that his phone was in an office, in a paper bag with his other belongs, waiting to be picked up by his brother).

After 4 or 5 rings, I heard a click followed by a familiar voice, "You've reached me, but I'm not here". I said out loud, "Yeah, I know where you are."

Michael

The
LifeGate
