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George Kornienko.

By Pat Fenton

I'm thinking of George Kornienko a/k/a "George the Bartender" tonight. The bar was called Rocky Sullivan's. It was on 29th Street and Lexington Avenue in Manhattan. And in my time of hanging out there in the late 1990s and up until it closed, I had the good fortune to get to know him. He was an old school bartender who was unlike anyone I ever met who worked behind the stick.

What was special about him is hard to put into words. Words always fail you when it comes to describing special people whose true value only appears when you meet them in person, when you hear the sound of their voices. When you hear them laugh.

Maybe this explains him a bit; something he said on a You Tube film after the wreckage of Hurricane Sandy wiped out the second Rocky Sullivan's Bar in Red Hook, Brooklyn and brought the entire neighborhood to its knees: "In a bad situation good people become great people, and okay people become better people."

Sadly he left us on July 6. He was only 52 years old when he died. He wasn't Irish, but he knew and understood more about the Irish than most people do. Up at the first Rocky Sullivan's in Manhattan he became friends with an endless roster of famous Irish writers who read on the small stage there.

The writer Chris Sullivan did the booking at Rocky's and every Wednesday night he would line up a writer like Jimmy Breslin, Pete

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Hamill, Tom Kelly, Colum McCann, or a sport's writer like Mike Lupica. The list went on and on with famous names like Roddy Doyle, and Vincent Patrick of "The Pope of Greenwich Village" fame, Frank McCourt, Dennis Smith, and Bernadette McAliskey. One Tuesday night, Kurt Vonnegut was scheduled but mysteriously he never showed up.

The small, narrow room would be packed with an eclectic mix of college students, writers, cops, firefighters and whoever else just drifted in. And behind the bar George would be the main force driving the excitement of the room with his presence.



The old Rocky's in Manhattan.

I had the privilege to read in Rocky's at least four times, and he would always have a pint waiting for me after the reading. The advice as you walked up toward the stage was, always "remember, less is more." I remember one night coming down the few stairs that led into the bar and the crowd reached the door. Jimmy Breslin was reading that night. They were four deep at the bar, and when George saw me come in, he yelled my name and sent a pint of Harp above the heads of the crowd to me. It wasn't the first time, and I wasn't the first person he did that for.

Like most really good New York bartenders he knew and worked many

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of the city's bars. He spent time in saloons like Marty O'Brien's on Second Avenue and 88th Street, a saloon named after the one Frank Sinatra's father owned in Hoboken, New Jersey.

On Monday afternoon of last week I took the Belt Parkway in to Brooklyn to George's wake which was at the Marine Parkway Funeral Home on Quentin Avenue. Not surprisingly, the room was packed, and an overflow crowd stood outside in the hallway. Four firefighters from Tower Ladder 131 in full working gear made their way through the crowd to pay their respects. Their Red Hook, Brooklyn Fire Company, not far from Rocky Sullivan's bar, is one of the oldest in the city.



George Kornienko, right, and Daniel McCabe in the old Rocky Sullivan's on Lexington Ave. near the corner of 29th Street.

Writer Kevin McPartland, who often read at Rocky's in the city, walked up to me and shook his head as he said, "So sad, Pat." And then with a slight smile on his face, "I have a hundred George stories." And it was obvious from the conversations drifting through the funeral parlor that so did the many guests who came to say goodbye to him.

I stood in a circle for a while talking with Kevin and Chris Byrne,

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George's business partner at Rocky Sullivan's in Red Hook. Chris's face just had a look of disbelief whenever he would mention George's death. "Are you planning a memorial for him at Rocky's?" Kevin asked him. "You know I haven't even thought about it yet. This happened so quickly."



Rocky Sullivan's in Red Hook.

As I drove down Flatbush Avenue toward the parkway I thought about something that would be a fitting memorial to a bartender like George, a bartender who could listen to people's troubles with the best of them. I'd love to see Joe Hurley stand sitting at the bar at Rocky Sullivan's in Red Hook and sing Sinatra's "One for My Baby", and dedicate it to George Kornienko.

Glasses up to you, George. Here's one back over the crowd to you about a place you made us all feel good in.

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