

Greg's Inheritance

Greg hired a limousine to drive him to Loaves & Fishes to pick up his final check. Talk about causing a stir: dozens of homeless people spilled out onto North C St. to watch one of their own play the role of a celebrity. No one could remember a limousine ever coming to Loaves & Fishes for anything, let alone delivering a formerly homeless person to pick up his check.

I knew Greg well because I had hired him, and he worked directly under my supervision for many years. And what a worker he was! Dependable, too! Pouring rain or blazing sun, Greg would be out on the neighboring streets surrounding Loaves & Fishes, picking up litter and illegally dumped trash or keeping all the chain link fences weeded and the jasmine vines neatly clipped. He worked five hours a day and ate his noon meal at Loaves.

Greg, like his father and younger brothers, had been a star athlete in football, baseball, and wrestling. Wiry, small in stature but muscular, and without an ounce of fat, with quick reflexes and lightening fast, Greg was a fearless high school sports competitor. No doubt he came by his athleticism naturally because of the family genes. His father, now recently deceased, had been a professional football player himself, and Greg's two younger brothers had been college football all-stars who were drafted into the National Football League.

Greg did not go to college; rather, he joined the army, wrestled, and rose to the level of master drill sergeant. Greg served 14 years and then resigned. He got married and had two children, but the marriage didn't last, especially after Greg was served with a court order preventing him from visiting his wife and children.

He supported himself by picking up car wash jobs, and he shared a rental place in the poorest area along the most northern edge of the city, close by where his father owned some rental duplexes on a five-acre parcel. By definition, Greg was not literally homeless, but he was poor enough that he had to come to Loaves during parts of the month to eat the free hot meal served every day at noon.

I have no clear recollection how we connected, but Greg was likely referred by a staff member with a casual remark like, “He’s a good worker.” And that he was. Cheerful, eager to please, organized, an eye for detail, always on time, he never missed a day during the years he worked for me.

One day, a few years before I retired from Loaves, Greg told me that his father had passed away, and when his dad’s estate was settled he would receive his inheritance. Months went by, I would inquire if he had heard anything about his inheritance. No, he hadn’t. Then a year passed, the same response. I began to wonder if his story hung together or if he had been cut out of the will, but I didn’t inquire further. Not long after, two huge men came to my office asking the whereabouts of Greg; they needed to talk with him. I was guarded in my response until I found out the nature of their inquiry. I figured them to be law enforcement types, but no, they were Greg’s brothers. Later, Greg told me they had come to Sacramento to meet with the estate’s attorney.

Months dragged by, still no definite word about the inheritance. Finally, I asked Greg how much money he thought he would receive. He didn’t know, he said, but he figured close to \$100,000. From the bits and pieces I had picked up from Greg about some of the properties his father had owned, I thought it might be more than that, but I didn’t say anything. I offered to help Greg open a savings account at our bank so that when the money was distributed he would have safe place to deposit it. He readily agreed, and I called the banker to make the arrangements.

In retrospect, I believe Greg received an initial distribution, which he deposited into the savings account. A year or so later, he must have received a second (and final) slug of money, and it was this sum that pushed him over the edge and led him to use a limousine to make his grand exit from the world of homelessness.

By this time I had retired from Loaves and, while still active, no longer had any day-to-day executive responsibility. Soon after the limousine incident, I received a frantic call from one of the staff members who knew Greg. She had heard from the street that Greg had begun a sort of entertainment spending binge with friends, and she was sure he was going to squander his

inheritance. She pleaded with me to call Greg and speak to him because “I know he will listen to you.”

I knew it was hopeless, but I promised to make the call. The only difference between the gospel story about the prodigal son and Greg was that the dissolute son had a wealthy father who loved him and welcomed his return after the inheritance had been squandered. The only thing waiting for Greg was time in the county jail and a dead-end job at the car wash after he was released.

Give him credit – Greg spent his inheritance in an extraordinary and extravagant manner. Besides the predictable expenses incurred with wine, women, and song, there was a seemingly never-ending flow of beer and drugs, and on at least three occasions, he chartered a helicopter to fly him to Los Angeles for the weekend, and during those stays he paid the pilot standby fees. Finally, all the money was spent, and in early 2003, just before the start of the Iraq war, Greg was doing county jail time for drug violations. I wrote him while he was in jail, but just as he no longer returned my telephone calls, he did not respond, though months later I received a street message thanking me for the letter. I made one last effort to make contact, but the guys working at the car wash said they did not know no Greg. I understood; no doubt I looked too much like a law enforcement type and up to no good.

I am not one to cluck and tsk about Greg’s decision to live it up for once in his life. Yes, I wish it had been otherwise, but I understood well enough why it was not. The only judgment I make is that Greg was one of the best and most dependable workers I ever met, and because of this, I cut him a lot of slack and hold him in very high regard.

