

I Want To Shake Your Hand

Wednesday night at 10:20 p.m. Richard Halter, age 52, was pronounced dead, the victim of an auto accident between a 1987 Dodge Dakota pickup truck and a 1972 Yamaha motorcycle just two miles north of Loaves & Fishes – Richard's destination. The driver of the truck received minor injuries.

Six years ago, I had barely finished my retirement speech at The Grand in downtown Sacramento, when Richard, a bear of a man, came right up to the podium, threw back his shoulders, cocked his head slightly to the right, took a deep breath, stared me full in the face and said: LeRoy, I just want to shake your hand and say thank you, you saved my life.

I suppressed my defensive and selfish urge to deflect and discount his sincerely delivered and forthright compliment; instead, I extended my hand and said: you're welcome, Richard.

Truth be told, it was Richard who needed to be thanked, he had saved himself from a life of substance abuse, he was clean and sober for the first time in many years, he was in recovery. My role? I had hired him to live at the Loaves & Fishes complex and work in the night watch program.

It has taken me several years to understand what Richard meant when he screwed up his courage that night at The Grand to look me in the eye and say his piece. What he meant goes something like this: I was in bad shape, I knew it, but I couldn't ask for help. I didn't believe in myself, I had let everyone down, I was no good. I got what I deserved. Loaves & Fishes accepted me, fed me, kept me alive, believed in me, and slowly I began to believe in myself. I wanted to walk the painful path of recovery.

It was not LeRoy Chatfield, it was the quiet, unassuming, welcoming, non-judgmental every day work of providing survival services through the charity, Loaves & Fishes, that was the lifeline for a hurting person like Richard. He simply paid tribute to the gospel spirit of providing a cup of cold water to a thirsty person, in the only way he knew how – to the retiring director.

And for my part, I say: Richard, I cannot shake your hand, but I just want to say thank you, you saved my life.

