

Recollections of Tim Thomas

Good afternoon everyone.

My name is Dave Gerlits, and I was a friend of Tim's.

I met Tim when we were in 7th grade at Central Junior High School. We met in Mr. Schott's study hall, back when we were both very young, very curious, and very sure we had all the answers. Yeah, we had a lot to learn...

We got to know each other a little bit that year, but did not share many classes together. As time went on, and we students sorted ourselves out by the classes we picked, Tim and I found ourselves becoming more frequent classmates, and grew to become good friends.

I have a lot of great memories of the times I spent with Tim, and with the other guys in our circle of friends. In order to know Tim, you need to know the guys he grew up with.

There was Rich Newell, who we got to know in Mr. Watson's Civics class. And there was Rich Altmaier, who we nicknamed "Hi-ya Rich" because he was tall and skinny and it seemed appropriate. Rounding out the group was Paul Roberts, who definitely brought a down to earth rowdiness to our little group of eggheads.

We were the math and science guys, and stayed together taking the same fascinating classes. The two Riches, Newell and Altmaier, were especially gifted in math, and took college math classes our senior year. They both went on to become very successful in Silicon Valley with their advanced degrees in electrical engineering.

Paul Roberts found himself being drawn back to the family farm, and has spent many happy years there. He also loved music as much as Tim did, but went in a different direction. Where Tim loved singing classical music, Paul learned the banjo, and has become quite the local celebrity playing bluegrass. He has played with the McPunk Brothers, the Great Bluegrass Herons, and has appeared in a lot of the Iowa Theater Arts Company productions over the years.

We ended up being a group of young men of many talents, and Tim was a very special part of a great group of guys. He helped bring out the best in us, and we helped bring out the best in him.

I want to share some of my fondest memories of Tim with you from those early years, so that you can understand what we meant to each other.

The first thing you need to know is that I'm not really a sports guy.

Unlikely as it might sound, my earliest fond memories of Tim revolve around sports.

Imagine that!

You may get the idea from what I said earlier that we were all intellect and nothing else, but Tim and I both encouraged each other through healthy competition in some sports as well.

Like many a young nerd of our time, we both loved to play Ping-Pong — yeah, just like Richie Cunningham and Potsie Weber on Happy Days. Tim had a mean forehand, and he had a knack for playing hard but not playing mean. I loved those ping pong games, and never felt like a loser when he won.

When the sun was out, we took our friendly battles out onto the tennis courts. We played a lot, even on those beastly hot and humid days when all the sensible people were indoors. There we would be, those two crazy teenage boys, whacking the ball around, sweating our skins off and loving it.

I said before that I was not a sports guy, but I was a wrestler in 7th, 8th, and 9th grade. I emerged from those years with a perfect record — I never won a match!

It helped me a lot though. It helped me get learn how to get fit, be a more well rounded guy, and become a guy who knew how to lose gracefully.

When I got to high school, I wanted to stay with sports, in my own unique way, so I joined the football team as one of the three equipment managers.

That first year, Tim could see how much fun I was having, traveling to far away, exotic places like Bettendorf, Ankeny, and Cedar Rapids. He could also see that I was making friends with some of the big, scary guys on the football team. Having big friends like these was important to the skinny little runt I was in high school.

In 11th grade, Tim joined me as football manager. Our junior and senior years we were the “Dynamic Duo”, mixing up gallons of Gatorade, schlepping footballs, tees, uniforms, and pads for the team.

We organized all the gear for the guys, cheered for our team, supported them when times were tough, and even got time to flirt with the cheerleaders.

Tim enjoyed managing so much that he made his own mark as wrestling manager.

And then, there was Music.

I remember how much Tim loved classical music, and how he helped me to love it too.

We both loved to listen to classical music, but Tim had a special gift for playing it too.

He studied piano when we were young, and in addition to being tall and lanky, he had very long fingers. He had at least a two octave span and could reach farther on a piano keyboard than anyone I knew. I loved listening to him play Chopin on the upright piano that his mom and dad had rescued from the Englert Theater.

The piano was in the basement at his house, right next to the ping pong table.

I loved to sit and hear him play and play for hours. His love of music was infectious. I caught the music bug from him and never recovered.

We were a couple of opera nuts as well. And just like the way we approached math and science, we devoured opera with energy and curiosity. We were never lukewarm about our interests. We would be really into a subject for quite a while, and when we dug a subject, we dug really deep.

I have two special music memories.

Since I brought up opera, I think it's time to share the story of the infamous "Don Giovanni Double Date."

By our junior or senior year in high school, we were both in love with the music of Mozart, and when the University advertised a production of the opera "Don Giovanni" we were "so there."

Tim and I had imagined how cool and classy it would be to go on a double date to the opera. We had never been on a double date, and we were both novices in the dating game. We had no idea what we were in for...

Tim was dating Laura Walters, who happened to be my first girlfriend, and I asked classmate Jackie Dague to come see the opera with me. Jackie was and still is a good friend, and one of the sweetest people you will ever meet. She knew nothing about opera, and asked me, with all innocence "Is that the one where they sing?" I gently replied "Yes Jackie. Would you like to go with me and Tim and Laura Walters?" Being the gentle good sport that she was, she said yes.

Well, Tim and I were, as the kids in Boston say, WICKED excited to be seeing the opera. On the other hand, honestly, I feel like Laura and Jackie could not have cared less. But they came, and we loved them for it.

What makes this memory so special for me is that Tim and I showed them just how clueless we were about dating and girls. We found our way to our

seats in the balcony at McBride Hall, and arranged ourselves with Tim and me in the middle, and Laura and Jackie on the ends.

What a mistake.

After a couple of minutes of Laura and Jackie leaning over us to talk to each other, we finally got the clue. We finally realized that Laura and Jackie would be a lot happier sitting next to each other. So we switched around, putting Laura and Jackie in the middle, and Tim and me on the ends, next to our dates.

Of course, when the opera started, Tim and I were sitting in rapt attention, glued to every word and note of the opera. I have no clue how Laura and Jackie spent their time, but I'm sure they made the best of the situation. When the opera was over, Tim and I were over the moon happy, and the girls, well, being who they were, said that they were glad we enjoyed the show.

They were both so kind and so patient with two intelligent, but so clueless, young men.

The other musical memory I want to share is a memory I call "Awe and Wonder and Beethoven".

Tim inspired awe and wonder in me. He did so with music.

I have a really strong memory of an experience that still gives me goosebumps when I think about it.

It must have been very late high school or early college. Tim was deep into his music education, and had been learning about conducting.

I remember sitting on the floor with him, listening to Beethoven's 5th symphony, with the orchestral score in an oversized book open in front of us. Beethoven's 5th was one of my favorite pieces of music, and I could read music, having learned the basics of the bass and treble clef, as well as the whole, half, quarter notes, and all the rest.

I was confused and overwhelmed at first, but Tim patiently turned the pages, and pointed to where we were every few seconds. Over time, I

began to see the patterns on the page matching the music. It got easier to follow as we enjoyed the first, second, and the third movements.

The awe and wonder came near the end of the third movement. I remember the music getting quieter and quieter and the notes on the sheet music getting sparser and sparser as the third movement was ending.

And then it happened. The entire orchestra went silent except for one kettle drum, and as I heard the boom-boom-boom I watched the single line of drum notes march across the page. Even now, I get the shivers just remembering how it felt to see and hear the music all at once.

Gradually the other instruments returned as the 4th movement began, but I will always remember how Tim was able to bring me that sense of awe and wonder on one otherwise very ordinary day.

Music was always a very special bond for us.

During junior high and high school Tim and his family were my refuge.

My memories of Tim were part of a much larger picture. I owe his family a great debt of gratitude for all of the warmth and caring they showed me through the years.

I grew up in an alcoholic household with all the chaos and stress that surrounds the addict, which, in my case, was my father.

Tim's mom and dad showed me that not every home was, or needed to be, like mine. They showed me that there could be a different way to live. They were calm, easy going, accepting, and tolerant people. I felt like I could be myself when I was with them, and that was a blessing for a boy who was growing into a man.

They created a home where I felt welcomed, seen, heard, and cared about, and that was something I never forgot.

Years later, as I began to study Buddhism, I was introduced to the concept of "taking refuge". As soon as I heard that phrase, I immediately thought of

Tim, his parents, and their home. I felt safe and accepted in their home, and their home felt like my refuge.

Later, I felt such gratitude for the caring they gave me, that I reached out to Betty and Al to thank them. I thanked them for creating and maintaining such a loving and accepting home and for inviting me into it.

Tim was so much like his parents. I felt that same sense of being seen, heard, and cared about when I was in Tim's presence that I felt with his parents.

Tim was intelligent, of that there is no doubt. But he was more than that.

Tim was a private man of strength, integrity, and deep caring.

I've struggled with how to convey how I felt about Tim. The only way I can say it is that he was my Best Man.

The term "Best Man" always carries a lot of meaning for me. Tim was the best man at my wedding, and over the years I have come to realize that the phrase means more than just "the guy that stood next to me at my wedding"

When Bobbi and I got married in 1982, Tim was right there with me, at my side. He and I didn't have a wild bachelor party, with drinking and dancing girls. Neither of us were into that wild partying scene. I don't remember much about that evening before my wedding other than his steady, reassuring presence — right when I needed it most. The next day he stood next to me in the chapel at the Naval Air Station in Weymouth MA, and was there for me as I set sail on my marriage, the greatest voyage of them all.

Through the years we kept each other company with the written word. Tim was an amazing writer. And he had the best penmanship I have EVER seen in a guy.

We kept up a lively correspondence via letter, and then by email when it came along. I felt that we were there for each other through all our life passages, as we each established our homes, our careers, and our ways in the world.

I always admired how Tim stayed true to his "True Loves" — his wife Maggie, and his singing. I was proud of him for sticking with his music all those years, and delighted that he had a voice teacher for so long. That was Tim — a man who knew that life was a journey of learning, and that there was always room to learn and grow.

We shared a lot, and were at each other's side down through the years. In one of his last emails to me, he wrote something that I want to share with you now:

Well, I have spent nearly an hour on this message, which makes it time much better spent than if I had been watching the boob tube. Near the end of "The Hound of the Baskervilles," Holmes says to Watson something that stayed with me: "Watson, you're my rock — the one constant in an ever-changing world." Not that you were ever Watson to my Holmes, but that line made me think of you. Stay rocky, my friend.

So, in the end, Tim was not just my Best Man.

Instead, he turned out to be the best man that I have ever had the privilege of knowing.

Good-bye Tim, and thank you.