

## INSEPARABLE

Greg, John, and Ken were inseparable. They lived in the same neighborhood and from third grade on they went to the same school until John moved away halfway through high school. They rode bikes together as kids, played golf and pool together in high school, and attended youth group at church together. When they couldn't play golf at the country club they went miniature golfing.

I met Greg when he was ten years old and my wife and I were newlyweds. He was a quiet young man, polite and easygoing. He did well in school and stayed out of trouble. Greg's mother was the church secretary, and during high school he worked part-time as church custodian.

I taught Sunday School and helped with the youth group. Greg was a regular and sometimes John and Ken attended too. About once a month the group went skating, bowling or played games in the church basement. Sometimes we had group conversations or one-on-one talks about things the kids were concerned about. A couple of questions surprised me because I hadn't encountered some of the pressures they faced when I was in high school. They seemed to appreciate the chance to talk with a trusted adult who was not their parent.



About 6:30 one morning, our home phone rang. It was the youth minister at the church, a close friend of ours.

"It's Nancy," she began. The emotion in her voice held great anguish.

Earlier that morning, while driving home from a late-night party, Ken's car crashed. Greg and John were killed instantly, and Ken died a few hours later at the hospital. Greg and Ken had graduated from high school earlier that evening. John, then living with an uncle in Oklahoma, had returned so that the three best friends could be together for graduation.

"Excessive speed and alcohol contributed to the crash," the police report said. "At 80 or 90 miles an hour, their car left the winding two-lane road. Ken's 1979 Toyota smashed head-on into a concrete culvert." The crash occurred about 2:30 am, two miles from the Train House Barn, a gathering spot rented out for private parties. An information sheet distributed to seniors advertised the post-graduation event as "The Last of the Late Great Parties."

A friend of the boys told the newspaper, "They were a real close group. They did everything together. As soon as I heard Greg and two others were killed, right away I knew who the other two

were.” The article stated: “The three 18-year-olds lived most of their lives just a few houses apart. They grew up together, played together, and went to school together. Early Wednesday, they died together.”

The shocking news of the boys’ deaths spread like wildfire through the community where they were well-liked and well-known. The youth ministers arranged for a triple funeral on Friday.



Greg and I both played on the men’s softball team at our church. Most of us were in our 20s or 30s with the exception of Greg and a retired commercial pilot in his 60s named Jack — our inspiration for staying young forever. Oftentimes family members and friends came to the Sunday afternoon games and cheered us on.

Greg was tall and slender and a good outfielder. He was especially adept at running in to catch fly balls. He always positioned himself deep in center field. When the ball was hit he would race up, his loose-fitting cap tumbling off his head, and at the last moment he would reach his glove out and snag the ball. Whether the ball was easy to reach or difficult, he made every catch a last-second snatch, and it made me smile every time.



It was already over 90° in mid-morning when my wife and I arrived for the funeral. Dozens of teenage friends cried and held each other up in front of the church. My tears spilled over the moment I opened the car door. We passed through throngs of wailing kids into the quiet, air-conditioned sanctuary. Three closed caskets were placed end-to-end, covered with pictures of the boys and surrounded by cascades of flowers. A golf carry bag stuffed with clubs stood at the end of the row. I was amazed that the youth ministers, who knew the boys well, got through the service. When young lives are cut short, there are no words powerful enough to comfort or to fill the hole their absence leaves in our lives. All that can be done is to grieve together and grieve alone and try to make it to the next day.

A profound sense of shock and disbelief reigned over the close-knit community for days — sorrow as deep, raw and widespread as anything I’ve ever experienced. The boys were buried side-by-side. Ken’s older brother, Kevin, was quoted in the paper as saying, “We figured since they all started together, they might as well finish together.”

I talked with Kevin after the service. His suit was wet with tears and wrinkled like he'd slept in it overnight. He told me he'd had a long interview with the reporter and was disappointed because that was the only quote they used.

Four decades later, there's still a short film in my mind that runs as clear as day: Greg races toward a fast-dropping line drive, his baseball cap tumbles off his head, and he makes a spectacular catch. John and Ken are standing by the infield fence, cheering.

Inseparable.