

## A Story About Bill Rooney

Who is Bill Rooney? Well, I never noticed him much myself. Good looking fellow with white hair, short beard, wearing a straw hat, he is the head guy at Stepping Stones Sailing Club. I remarked to him when I saw him on the launch that he must be a very patient man. Ten kids on every boat. And 10 kids at the worst age, middle schoolers, junior high schoolers, whatever they call them now, carrying on, screaming and yelling, the girls wearing their best nail polish and the boys all think that they are the latest incarnation of popular rock stars.

Nevertheless, they're kids, they're learning how to sail, and it's sure a lot better than doing drugs.

I turned to Bill and remarked that I admired him for his patience. He did not answer, and gave me kind of a cold stare. I did not even know his name at this point. I introduced myself as Cliff and I asked his name. He looked at me like, "what the hell business is it of yours what my name is," and then he reluctantly told me "Bill."

Not one to let other people slide by, I forced him to engage in conversation with me. Well, it turns out that he is a Great Neck North graduate, one year younger than me. He looks about the same age, but has whiter hair and a ruddier complexion.

He shortly became my best buddy. He told me his life story. His life story is one of woe. He was in many businesses growing up in Great Neck, and lost all his money in the stock market, \$700,000 he said. He grew up on Red Brook Road, which I think is a pretty fancy neighborhood in Kings Point, but who knows. It was not near where I grew up. It was not Allenwood Road, that's for sure.

He told me that he lost his wife, after a long battle where she was incapacitated. I am not sure if it was cancer or what, but it sounded like an awful story. When he told me this story, the formerly cold man clearly became choked up.

He told me that he lost his money in the stock market, lost the love of his life, and had two heart attacks. He mentioned that his father had a boat at Stepping Stones, just like my father did. His father had a catamaran. All was lost and he was ready to drift out on the boat onto the high seas and end it all.

One day he was on the dock and he was approached by Manny and someone else. I don't remember the other person's name, but I know Manny. Manny is the guy everybody considered hostile and crazy. He used to head the sailing school until they apparently canned him. He was born in Israel in 1935 or who knows when. He is about 90 now. He is a real negative guy, basically a communist. Hates everybody, hates everything, hates Israel, hates Netanyahu, and gave Joshua a raft of grief last year. Joshua was so angry with him that he would never speak to the guy again. Joshua considered Manny a worthless human being, and

when we would see Manny sitting around the dock, even after he was canned, none of the people in my family would talk with him. He would not even look at us.

There was this terrible person, this Manny, this worthless human being; this rotten, no-good beast of a man, who, according to Bill, “saved my life.” He said that if Manny had not suggested that he take over the sailing school while Manny was there and after Manny was canned, Bill told me he would not have survived.

Once again we see the wisdom of Pirkei Avot, which counsels, “Have contempt for no one for every person has their value. Do not reject any idea, for every idea has its place.”

How right the Pirkei Avot is.

I pointed this out to Joshua later. I said, you see how we judged Manny so harshly; maybe he’s not the nicest guy and maybe we don’t like his politics and maybe, maybe, maybe; but he rose to the occasion, counseled this man not to give up, and as a result Bill Rooney has a life and he told me he was “saved” by Manny, the pain-in-the-butt who everybody disliked and got fired from his own job.

Rooney and I wound up ending on a positive note. He wanted to give me a hug. We kind of hugged, awkwardly, and shook hands. So here’s this guy, who did not even want to tell me his name, obviously had this terrible life story, and once he learned who I was, wanted to give me a hug.

Before he realized my relationship to Joshua, the launch operator, he said to me, “That kid. He’s a good one. I like him; he is made out of good stuff and he’ll succeed.”

At that point, Joshua turned around and told him that he was my son and I was his father. I pointed out to Bill Rooney that we were third generation. He is second generation here at Stepping Stones. Bill seemed shocked. He looked at me and he looked at Joshua, and Joshua said, “Don’t you see a resemblance?” Well that made him our fast friend. Maybe that led to the attempted awkward hug as well.

So life is interesting and strange. I have told Joshua many times that while his friends may be working at Goldman Sachs, big law firms, hospitals and all kinds of fancy places, what Joshua has learned about life running the patrol boat, the launch at Stepping Stones Marina, watching the beach, pulling dumb kids out of the water who fall in, making sure the commercial traffic doesn’t run into the lighthouse. What he has learned doing all of that is more valuable than anything he will ever learn in college or graduate school or law school or medical school or anywhere else. He has learned about life and about people and how to deal with all of them.

A real piece of evidence concerning that was when the tugboat driver showed up from last year. This is the guy Joshua cursed under his breath as being an “asshole.” For that, Joshua got reported and had to apologize. He had a virtual meltdown over it, was ready to quit his job and was totally beside himself by what happened. This year, when the tugboat operator

came in, the other guys on the dock told Joshua not to worry; they would go out and meet him. Joshua said, "Don't worry; I'm not going to go out there and beat the shit out of the guy. In fact, I'm going to be extremely nice to him and ask how he's doing and how his family is." Joshua was actually anxious to go out there and have a second round with this guy, as the nice guy.

Oh, what a lesson we learn just from living; nothing that can be learned in books, that's for sure.

Now, of course, there's nothing wrong with books. I have read a lot of books in my day and spent a lot of time in college classrooms. It's just that the combination of the two is what really makes people interesting, worthwhile and successful. Anyway, that's all for now; just an interesting story.

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