

Tribute to Richard Klein

By Ellen Futterman

One of St. Louis' greats passed away last Friday. His name was Richard Klein.

"Who the hell is Richard Klein and who cares," you ask? Well the thing is, he anticipated that question, which was why he chose to use that line as the title of his recently self-published memoir. It chronicles his long career as "an idea savant."

Now don't squinch before I explain. Richard did quite well in many of his pursuits including public relations, real estate, moviemaking and more. But as he liked to point out, whatever he accomplished, from pioneering the Arts & Entertainment and Lifetime cable networks through his work with ABC Video Enterprises, to creating a line of personalized greeting card records using the voices of Joan Rivers and Rod McKuen, to developing a series of films that provided a decade-by-decade overview of the 20th century," each started with a big idea.

I remember our first meeting three years ago. I went to Richard's home in Richmond Heights where, seated on the couch in his study, he asked what I knew about writing a memoir.

"Absolutely nothing," I told him frankly, "but that doesn't mean I can't learn." And so we began what he liked to call "our great book adventure."

A couple of times a week, I would sit with him, take notes and run a recorder while he talked about his life. It didn't take much to get him going - he was the consummate storyteller. In fact, he had written several key chapters of his memoir long before I came into the picture. Unfortunately, a couple of strokes left him blind in his left eye and partially blind in his right, which was why he needed a writer in the first place.

Richard had a lot of health issues in his 76 years, including three spinal surgeries in three consecutive years, five-way bypass heart surgery, insulin-dependent diabetes and those multiple strokes. He required portable oxygen 24/7. Still, he always showed up chipper and in a great mood, upbeat about life and its infinite possibilities.

His positivity was infectious. I'd leave Richard's house smiling for no good reason, or so I thought. Often I was smiling to myself, even laughing, because of the outrageous stories he had just told.

My favorites came from his childhood. The youngest of Angela and Alfred Klein's three children, Richard Angelo Klein grew up a fifth-generation Jewish American in an upper middle-class Philadelphia home where he pretty much wreaked havoc. In 1941, when he was six years old, his parents invited his first grade teacher to the

house for dinner, which was customary to do in those days. While his parents were getting dressed for dinner his teacher arrived, so they asked Richard to entertain her.

Unlike his big sister Nancy, he didn't play piano, and he couldn't recite the batting order of the Philadelphia Phillies like his big brother Lewis. In fact, it dawned on him right at that moment that he had no real talents whatsoever. So between the uncomfortable silences that fell between he and his teacher and his sweaty armpits, he came up with his first big idea.

As he tells it, his hand went to the silver box on the coffee table where his parents kept their cigarettes. He slid the box open, extracted an unfiltered Chesterfield, put it between his lips and with one flick of his thumb on the silver Ronson table lighter, lit the cigarette. Then he proceeded to show his teacher how to blow smoke rings.

"To be honest, I can't remember much else about that dinner except that it wasn't the last time I had a big idea that didn't go over as well as I had hoped," he said. And it's true. He'd be the first to tell you that some of his best ideas fell flat, including ones for "Mother Klein's Kosher Style Dog Food" with actor Herschel Bernardi doing the radio spots, and a "walk-in drive-in," which simulated an outdoor drive-in but with cars parked inside a cavernous ballroom.

Nevertheless, Richard's best idea - and I know he would agree - was marrying his wife Virginia (Jinny for short). It was a second marriage for each, though Richard had no children from his first and Jinny had four. She was a devout Catholic who attends mass daily and he, admittedly, was the most reformed Reform Jew. Still, even through his blindness, she lit up his life every day for all 34 years of their marriage.

"Jinny, the love of my life, the person who saved me from myself," he recently wrote. "God how I have loved you Jinny. I am not a particularly religious person but sometimes I have to believe that God, in his infinite wisdom recognized my weaknesses and sent me the closest thing, his personal ambassador . . . I believe that true love is so powerful that it transcends our physical being . . . I shall be with you forever."

The two traveled extensively together and also enjoying throwing parties for their wide circle of friends. When Jinny called to say Richard had died last Friday, peacefully and at home, she mentioned their last party held exactly a month ago at Cardwell's in Clayton to celebrate the release of his memoir. Family and friends flew in from around the country, including his cronies from his days at ABC, joining others from St. Louis who had come to know and love Richard and looked forward to reading his life story.

As I made my way through the throng of well-wishers to give him a hug -- he looked very frail but was smiling as usual -- he reached out his hand. Claspng it, I told him I was glad the book was finally done and we could celebrate together.

Without missing a beat, he replied: "I've got an idea for our next project. I think we should turn the book into a one-man play."

Rest in peace, Richard Klein. Heaven is a better place with your lofty ideas.