

Hi. Thanks for being with us today. For those that don't know, I'm Linda Ruff, Ken's sister. He was the 5th Nemetz, I was the 6th. And this is Lori Veazey, my brother's long-time friend and the mother of his 3 beautiful children, Jessi, Malorie and Drea.

Ken had many close friends throughout his life. One very special friend from college is Rob Bell. Since the three of us attended college together Rob asked that Lori and I read this for him in his absence. He couldn't be here due to the wild fires in California. He asked that we read this to the rhythm of "The End of the Innocence" by Don Henley.

*Remember when we first were friends
years ago in Maryland
We were young and quite naïve
but then again, who would believe
that a New York boy and a Texas kid
would've laughed about the things we did
We always found our ways to win
as college days rolled by*

*And there was a place
we used to go
to drink a beer or two
Throw a coin in that old jukebox
and laugh all night at The Vows*

*You can take your best shot from the outside
we can scratch our heads and wonder why
Wonder why we were friends...
but those were **our** days...
Those were **our** days, spent in Maryland*

It was August, 1979. Just turned 18. It was hard for out-of-state students to get on-campus housing at the University of Maryland so my folks secured for me a 3-bedroom townhouse off campus. The deal, my father said, was I was responsible for filling the other two rooms. I had already secured one room with a guy named Kevin from Long Island. To fill the last room, I put up an ad at the Student Union.

The phone rings. "Hi, my mom and I just saw your ad for a roommate. We'd like to come by and look at the place."

Ok great, I thought. But something in my New York brain was hearing something out of the ordinary. What was it?

I gave him the address and directions. He said, "Thanks, we should be there in about 15 minutes." Ah, it was an accent. "Ok, my mom and I will be here. By the way, where ya from?"

"TEXAS!" Click.

Uh oh. "Um, Mom? We got *Texans* coming over."

I met Kenny and his Mom, Anita. Anita was very talkative, Kenny not so much. But there was this kind of smirk on his face. HmMMM.

Kenny took the place and was to move in tomorrow.

The next day there's a knock on the door. I open it and there's Anita, with a big smile on her face, shoves a bottle of white wine into my chest and, with a huge smile says, "Here kid, pour me a glass and chill the rest." What the...????

Kenny walked in behind carrying a box. After I saw to Anita's thirst and wine temperature requirements, I went out to their car to help. I grabbed this huge box. It was unusually heavy.

"Hey, what the hell is in here?"

"Albums."

I thought, ‘Cool, he’s into music.’ I brought the box in, set it down, opened the flaps just to take a peek at what kind of music he listens to.

Thumbing through the albums....
Ah, The Allman Brothers. Good.
The Beatles. *Excellent!*
Jimmy Buffett. Wait, what???

Wait a minute... Jimmy Buffett??? There had to be at least 20 Buffett albums in there. What the hell did I get myself into?

“Hey, Tex?”

“Yeah?”

“Jimmy *Buffett*? The guy who sings about freakin’ cheeseburgers and margaritas?”

“Yeah, buddy!”

“No way are you playing that crap in here, pal!”

There was that smirk again.

To this *day*, I don’t know how he converted me into a Buffett fan.

He didn’t talk much those first few weeks. When he did, he spoke about his girlfriend, Lori, *a lot!* Showed me pictures of her and all his friends from back home. All of them who went to colleges in Texas. He said he was pretty much the only one of his friends who came east for school. Kind of a family tradition I came to find out. His sisters Cheryl and Andrea, Georgetown and Boston College, his brother George at Tufts, his sister Ili stayed in Texas to go to school and his little sister Linda, still in high school... for now. He was quiet because he missed his friends and his family... both, I learned, were *extremely* important to him.

He would revel in the stories he told about his friends and his family and about some legendary guy named Big G. Kenny came alive with these stories.

He was a great storyteller and the stories were hysterical. Well, nothing left to do then to add to his repertoire of stories...

There was the time at 10 PM on a Saturday night that I had a craving for Chinese food. Ken said there aren't any Chinese food restaurants open at this time. "No problem," I said. "I know a place." I threw him into my car and drove. About an hour into it, he said "Where the hell are we going?"

"Don't worry, I know a place"

Four hours later we're at Wo Hop's in New York City's Chinatown where we ate at 2:30 in the morning.

He got me back. *Many* times!

For instance, soon after the movie Urban Cowboy came out, he and Lori, who had now become an official terp, pleaded with me to go out with them, and some other friends, to this country western bar... ugh, the things you do for friends. Ok, fine, I'll go.

We get there and in the middle of the floor, of this fairly large bar in Beltsville, MD, was a mechanical bull. The bull was surrounded by mattresses, laid out to pad the fall of all the *geniuses* who got on this thing. Unbeknownst to me, I was about to become a genius.

Kenny (who else?) launches into a story about how he and his friends back in Texas ride these things all the time. He said *it's a blast and a lot easier than it looks. The trick, he said, was to really concentrate on not letting go of the saddle horn.*

"Okay," I say. "Show me how it's done."

"Nah, it's \$20 to ride it and we all chipped in for YOU to ride it. Go on, you're gonna love it! It's a classic! Just grip that handle really hard and don't let go" he said with that Kenny-boy smirk on his face.

"Fine."

"How hard could this be?" I thought. Just DON'T let go like Ken said. They paid and I signed the waiver holding the bar not liable if I crack my head open and proceeded to hop on the thing.

It's starts. Hey, not bad, I got this. This *is* easier than it looks! Yeah, that was for the first few seconds. Then it got interesting. This thing slowed down a little and then, from out of nowhere, it reared up and down then spun violently flinging me *over* the mattresses where I landed on this table with 3 pitchers of beer on it.

After checking to see if my head was still attached I got up and walked back to our table soaked, from head to toe, in whatever was on tap.

Kenny's laughing, hysterically. I grab him by the shirt and say, "Ok, cowboy. Your turn!"

Me?? "What are you nuts???" "I've never been on one of those things in my life!!"

The thing about the little pranks we played on each other was that we never would've done it if we didn't know the other could handle it and laugh about it. In a strange way, it was about respect for each other's ability to roll with it and laugh.

Right now, through my tears, I am laughing and I'm laughing so much my heart is bursting.

Kenny's heart was *huge!*

I think back to the day of my wedding and there was no one there, and I mean ***no one***, who was happier for me than Kenny. He'd known me a long time and, I just saw it in his face, how important my happiness was to him. *That*, that right there, was one of the best gifts I ever received in my entire life. He was bursting with Kenny-Robby stories to all of my wife's friends, all of whom fell in love with Kenny-boy from Texas.

It was truly important to him that I have the best night of my life.

Towards the end of the night, the band played Clapton's "Wonderful Tonight" so my wife and I could end the night with a slow dance. And, there was Ken. Standing next to us on the dance floor, smiling that smirk... that knowing smirk I've loved my entire life.

He stood with us on that dance floor, wrapped his arms around both our shoulders and swayed with us to the music...

*"And the wonder of it all
Is that you just don't realize
how much I love you"*

I'll never forget that moment or him.

I don't know why God put us in front of each other that August....39 years ago, but I do know this: my life would not have had the enormous amount of laughter it had without you!

You made my life richer. I am honored to have been your friend. I am honored that you chose to love me.

I'll miss you forever and, right now, I can hear you whispering in my ear,

*"Robby, some of it's magic
Some of it's tragic
But I had a good life all the way."*

"Yeah, buddy!"

Get that mechanical bull ready for me up there Kenny-Boy. When we meet again, we'll ride it together, this time. Just hold on to that handle and don't let go. I know I'll never let go of you!