

Kim Peek

1951-2009

Darold Treffert, MD

April 10, 2008 was a very happy event for both the Wisconsin Medical Society (Society) and the Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation (Foundation). Father and son, Fran and Kim Peek, who “share the same shadow” according to Kim, shared that remarkable, bonded image with those attending the annual Foundation dinner. Kim never forgets anything. And I am certain those in attendance will never forget Kim.

December 19, 2009, on the other hand, was a very unhappy day. I received a phone call around dinnertime from Fran who told me Kim had died suddenly of a heart attack earlier that afternoon. We lost a friend that day. I say “we” because Kim and Fran so enjoyed their time with Society members and their significant others that April evening and had hoped to return someday to a place at which they felt so warmly welcomed.

Kim Peek was, and remains, the Mount Everest of memory. Other accounts have told of some other “memory giants” in the past. I am familiar with all of them, but none can match Kim’s factual memory—so deep and seemingly without limit—and I doubt any in the future will rival that astounding capacity

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Kim Peek pictured in the classic Buick from the movie *Rain Man*. Peek was the inspiration for screenwriter Barry Morrow's 1988 Oscar-winning movie.

either. Kim’s data bank of 15 areas of expertise—history, geography, space exploration, the Bible, sports, area codes, ZIP codes, maps, to name only a few—will remain, I am convinced, unsurpassed. Moreover, unlike so many memory giants of the past whose memories were “without reckoning,” in recent years Kim had become a living Google™, linking all those facts with astonishing rapidity and in ways that sometimes took me a day or 2 to find out what the connection was. But there always was a connection. Kim was simply ahead of me with those associations, puns, and witticisms.

I got to know Kim when our paths crossed around the movie *Rain Man*. Kim was the inspiration for that excellent film; I had the opportunity to be a technical consultant to the movie. My first contact with Kim was a phone call. Kim asked my birth date and told

me it was a Sunday, the evening of President Roosevelt’s first fireside chat. I didn’t know that. Then he proceeded to tell me the date and day of the week I would turn 65 and could retire. Next came my ZIP code, area code, television stations from Green Bay and Milwaukee broadcasting to our area, which phone company served this area; recent Packer game scores, and the day, temperature, and final score of the ice bowl game (at which I nearly did freeze to death). Then I learned more than I ever knew before about the Stockbridge and other American Indian tribes in the area, the Niagara Escarpment on which our house rests, and some political history of the progressive movement in Wisconsin, including exactly who my senators and representatives were.

My initial interest in Kim had to do with savant syndrome, of which

he was such a spectacular example. In spite of extensive central nervous system (CNS) damage from the time of birth, including an encephalocele and absent corpus callosum, Kim had one of the most extraordinary brain capacities I have ever encountered. Kim had memorized—yes, memorized—literally thousands of books. He did so with amazing rapidity, scanning paperback size books with 1 eye reading 1 page and the other eye reading the adjacent page—simultaneously. Then that material would go to his hard drive for storage. I kept waiting for the “disk full” message to come up, but it never did.

Fortunately, we have retained some detailed imaging studies of Kim—computed tomography, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), functional MRI, diffusion tensor imaging—that we can use to compare and contrast his brain imaging to others in the future. And we have neuropsychological profiles and other studies preserved as well. From those we can learn more about savant syndrome through the unique window into the brain that savant syndrome—and particularly Kim Peek as a prodigious savant—provides.

But as startling as Kim’s skills and abilities were, and as revealing as our glimpses into his brain will be for future research, neither of those are what I will remember most about Kim.

What I have learned about circuits in the brain from Kim is dwarfed by what I learned from Kim and Fran about matters of the heart. Fran was told to put Kim in an institution. Another doctor suggested a lobotomy. But the family would have none of that. They loved him, nurtured him, celebrated his abilities, worked around his disabilities, and nourished those “islands of intactness” that eventually allowed his “islands of genius” to surface and prosper. Yes, they cared *for* him. But they unconditionally cared *about* him as well. What a wonderful role model they have provided for so many other families who have been visited by disabilities. And it is a role model for us as physicians as well—caring about our patients as we care for them.

After Kim’s death, I put a note on the savant syndrome website (which the Society has kindly sponsored all these years) that anyone who wished to send a note of condolence to Fran could do so, and I would send it on to Fran. Fran doesn’t do e-mail. Hundreds of notes, from all over the world came flowing forth—from parents of disabled children, from disabled persons themselves, from students who were touched by the presentation in their schools (some of whom are going into neuroscience now), from teachers, from therapists, and from just plain folks who

were so touched by Kim and Fran during their nearly 3-million-mile journey to share their story, and their shadow. Running through that cascade of appreciative notes, variously written, was really a single word—*inspiration*.

That’s the same word I would use for how Fran and Kim left us that April evening—*inspired*.

And that’s how Kim has left me. Touched and inspired. Kim was more than an interesting case of savant syndrome to me—Kim and Fran became my friends. That happens with our “patients” sometimes.

Kim went home for Christmas. As I told Fran when I spoke to him the next day, as I looked up in the sky that December night he called me, there was a new star shining brightly, differently shaped than all the rest. But as I looked up I remembered the words Kim said so often: “We are all different. You don’t have to be handicapped to be different. Treat other people like you would like to be treated and the world will be a better place.”

One of the condolence messages came from China. I can’t read Chinese so I had my computer translate it, somewhat awkwardly, for me. It said “Kim Peek, will live in our heart forever. Thank Fran.”

Indeed Kim will live in our hearts forever. And indeed, thank you Fran.



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Christopher Reeve

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