

## **My Best Practical Joke**

I'm not one to play practical jokes on my friends and I'm pretty good about being on guard when I'm about to be punked by friends. Ruth did get me pretty good on my seventy-fifth birthday...she had some family from out-of-town for lunch several weeks before my seventy-fifth birthday, and little did I expect that she had invited ninety folks for a surprise party at 3:00 that afternoon. They all gathered at Sandy Graham's next door and I was REALLY SURPRISED when they all arrived together! Ruth claims that she can't fool me regarding Christmas or Birthday gifts but she really pulled that one off...big time. Ruth's surprise was not a practical joke, but like practical jokes provided many laughs for everyone and a big surprise for the intended victim.

### **The Setting**

The best practical joke I ever pulled was on a friend and colleague at the College of Medicine, where I was Director of Basic Medical Sciences. I won't mention the victim's name but for purposes of this story let's call him Dr. Theodore "Ted" Voneida. Let us also imagine that he was the Chair of Neurosciences.

Ted, an outstanding professor, had been invited to be a Visiting Professor of Neurosciences at the University of Hawaii for three months during the winter term and was about to leave for this assignment...when I received this vision of how he might be properly sent on his way...and the practical joke started to take on a life of its own.

From my observations, I was aware that when Ted came to work each morning, he would quickly thumb through the correspondence in his "In Box" on the secretary's desk before heading into his office. This was an important behavior on his part that would help in the development of the practical joke. I then set

about developing a handout that would purportedly announce a going away party in Ted's honor.

## **The Preparation**

The handout looked something like this:

December 17, 1979

Kent State University Ball Room

# **Friends of Ted Voneida Day** (Shhhh....It's a Surprise!)

(Ted will be leaving for Hawaii January 8th and this will be our chance to show him our love, and send him off on this Pacific adventure...gifts will be appreciated)

**\*\*\*Lunch will be at 12:30...guests please arrive at 12:00 to surprise Ted!\*\*\***

Before setting the date for "The Party," I had contacted the manager of Kent State University (KSU) Banquet Services, who I knew quite well, and we determined that the best date for this "luncheon" would be December 17, because the Davey Tree

Expert Company had already scheduled the Ball Room for their annual Christmas Party for 500-600 guests. The room would be decorated for Christmas and all tables would be festooned with table cloths, silverware, flowers and candles! There would also be a head table.

As soon as I knew that December 17 would be the date of “The Party,” I made an appointment with Ted for lunch on December 17 and said I would drive and we could eat at the KSU Student Center. The next morning, Ted’s secretary slipped a copy (the only copy) of the above handout into Ted’s In Box on her desk. Almost as if he had been cued, Ted arrived the next morning and thumbed through his mail. After his secretary noted he had read the handout, she said, “You were not to see that... Dr. Saltzman would kill me if he knew I had left that in there.” He said, “That’s OK, don’t worry about it.” The bait had been taken. No one let the secret slip because no one else knew about it!

I ordered steaks and Jack Daniels for Ted and me...to be served at each end of the head table...a distance of about twenty feet. I ordered an overhead projector, and prepared an transparency noting “Friends of Ted Voneida Day” to be displayed on the giant screen in the Ballroom. I also prepared two small signs to be placed on the Davey Tree registration tables (a. “Gifts for Ted” and, b. “Register and Write a Going Away Note to Ted”), and several signs with arrows pointing indicating “Parking for Friends of Ted Voneida Day” to be placed near the KSU parking lot. I also made arrangements for special music for the event.

## **The Party**

On December 17th, Ted and I walked to my car at the College of Medicine for the seven mile trip to the University Center. We talked about his forthcoming trip and his travel plans. As we arrived at the Student Center, he could not have missed the parking signs, but never said a word about it. A small fortuitous detail occurred as we were walking into the Student Center that I was unaware of, but Ted noticed and told me about later. Ted's graduate assistant walked quickly out of the Student Center and just as quickly returned to the Student Center. Ted said he thought, because he had got wind of "The Party" from reading the handout, that his assistant had noticed us and was returning to alert the guests. Actually, she hadn't seen us but had forgotten something and was returning to get it. By chance, it helped to make the ruse even more effective.

Ted, a brilliant person, realized what was happening the moment we walked into the empty Ball Room! He couldn't stop laughing and he loved what had just happened.

We took our seats at the Head Table, were served Jack Daniels... Ted drank his Black Jack as I gave a short speech about how he would be missed (not so much) and then read a few faux telegrams from folks who gave very shallow reasons for not attending The Party in Ted's honor. As we finished our steaks and cheesecake...and maybe one more Black Jack, the ceremony was brought to a close by a saxophone rendition of, Auld Lang Syne, played by Dr. Martin Kohn, who had just finished his fifth saxophone lesson...you can just guess how that song sounded...it was perfect!

Ted and I are now both retired, live close to one another and are good friends.... and for nearly thirty-five years I have been expecting for him to get even. I guess he is just tormenting me by making me wait.

December 2014

Note: This story may be better in that I have waited nearly thirty-five years to write it. In any event, it is the way I remember it.