

# The Carletonian

## The story of Patrick Kinney, the man behind the bench

By JEFF SLOCUM  
*ALUM*

Ah, Spring Term of senior year – those days have dropped far astern for me, but the remembrance makes me well up with nostalgia, not to mention considerable envy for you. The cruel irony of college is that just as you get really good at it, they bounce you out. I have a vivid memory of driving up 35W after my Commencement, towing a U-Haul with all my worldly goods, thinking, “What in the corn toot – that’s it?”

Doubtless there will be a flurry of valedictory events for you and your classmates, leading up to Commencement. The notion of “Commencement” has always been a joke to me; I spent the better part of a decade after Carleton starting to get ready to commence to begin. Anyway, your ears will be filled with words of high purpose, sage advice, and principled encouragement from a host of worthy and distinguished people. If you are anything like me, you won’t remember a word of it. I have always had a decided preference for learning from my own mistakes.

Carleton seems uniquely adept at attracting and nurturing successful people. When they leave Northfield, they are smart and ambitious, and because of who they are, there is a high likelihood that they will have opportunities essentially laid in their laps. Some people will be insightful (or lucky) and recognize the opportunities for what they are. Talent and effort kick in, and we eventually read about the achievements in the alumni magazine.

Unlike schools in the Ivy League, Carleton hasn’t made much of a show of its association with its successes. Where there has been substantial monetary gain from the success, and Carleton has wheedled some of that into its own coffers, plaques or buildings or other recognitions sometimes appear, but I know that when I was a student, I didn’t pay much attention to those things. I cannot, for instance, tell you anything about Mr.

Severance, or Ms. Evans, or Mr. Willis, or for that matter, William Carleton. Maybe you and your cohorts are more aware of these, but I doubt it.

In front of Sayles-Hill there is a bench. I haven’t actually seen it, but the College has sent me a picture of it, and as benches go, this one seems solid and fine. On the bench is a plaque that states something to the effect that the bench has been placed in fond memory of Patrick J. Kinney. Carleton’s Administration, for a host of sensible reasons, has rules about what constitutes an appropriate and tasteful message on plaques around campus, so Pat’s plaque doesn’t say much.

This is too bad, because as Pat’s roommate for two years, I can tell you that he was a remarkable guy. By the world’s usual measures of success, though, Pat was the perfect antithesis. He was never graduated from college; he died broke and deeply in debt (in fact, to my knowledge, he never held any job that made contributions to Social Security); he did little to advance the cause of world peace, or make the world more free or just; none of his artworks or other creative endeavors endure, beyond the obligatory graffiti in Carleton’s tunnels; he stopped brushing his teeth when he was still in high school (really); and he struggled with schizophrenia all of his adult life.

As freshmen, we were an odd pairing. My background was purely conventional, almost a caricature of south Minneapolis middle class. Pat had been born in North Dakota. When he was about ten, his youngest sister brushed against a gas stove and her dress caught fire. By the time Pat’s mother beat the flames out, Pat’s sister had been hideously burned over half of her body. A nurse, Pat’s mother cut her daughter’s charred clothes off and sprayed her with antiseptic, a move that saved her life. She was transferred to the Shriners Hospital in the Twin Cities for a program of skin grafts and treatments that lasted years. Pat’s mother moved her family to Minneapolis to be near her daughter, but by this time, Pat’s

father had disappeared from the scene. Pat saw his father once after that, when Pat was in his twenties. He tracked his father down in South Dakota, had a few beers with him, and drove back to Minneapolis.

We embraced with rapturous abandon the freedom that comes with being out of the prying eyes of parents and authority figures, and Freshman Week turned into Freshman Month before it occurred to either of us to attend a class. Carleton, Northfield, St. Olaf, southern Minnesota all were vast playgrounds to be explored, frequently enhanced by snootfuls of beer and other fogs. Pat had read and re-read *Catch 22* in high school, and it had revealed the world to him with profound clarity. He believed that society and all institutions were riddled with absurdities, but he did so without the usual affected cynicism and world-weariness. In fact, he was pretty cheerful about the whole thing. Most of the world’s absurdities had escaped my notice to that point in my life, so I had some catching up to do. I quickly and gratefully discovered under Pat’s tutelage that once a class had been identified as absurd, there was no longer any guilt associated with skipping it, and one could spend more time listening to *The Doors* and *Buffalo Springfield*.

Through judicious selection of courses, and the pure charity of some professors I later gave glowing recommendations for tenure, Pat and I gathered enough credits by the end of freshman year to avoid repeating it at some Minneapolis-area votech school. We dreamed of escaping the riotously puerile, all male fun of Second Musser for a floor where there would be a chance to talk to a female without provoking snorts of disdain, but our room-draw numbers seemed to doom us to another year with the fellas. Fortunately, Pat had a genius for concocting schemes to Beat The System. He proposed that, even though we were stretching the definition of “sophomore,” we would sign up for the Junior/Senior Arts Program. As participants in the

program, we would be eligible to by-pass room-draw and live in the opulent splendor of the Arts Special Interest House, presumed to be joyously co-ed. I pointed out the one flaw in the plan: Neither of us pretended to do anything remotely connected with the arts. No problem, Pat assured me. We will form a band. We sold the idea of a band to three other victims of the room-draw process, and “Terry and The Thunderbirds” was formed.

Since most of the band members had never before held an instrument, we needed to keep things simple. Anything with more than three chords was eliminated as hopelessly beyond our abilities. This resulted in a song list of covers of classic tunes from the ‘fifties and ‘sixties. As luck would have it, the nation was experiencing a surge of popularity for the re-discovery of Little Richard, Elvis, Bill Haley and the Comets, Dion and the Belmonts – all of them three chord masters. Carleton provided us with rehearsal space in what had been the women’s shower room in the basement of Sayles-Hill (pre-renovation). Through the cacophony of the fall of our sophomore year, we actually progressed to the point where an untrained ear could recognize most of the songs. And we got college credit without the annoying requirement of attending classes. A booking agent in Minneapolis heard us, and by Winter Term we were playing in some real dives all over the Midwest. We weren’t good enough to do faithful renditions of the songs, and our P. A. system was so crummy that no one could hear himself, so each band member kept turning up the volume. High volume through cheesy amps produced a sound that can only be described as punk, though, of course, *The Sex Pistols* had not yet entered the consciousness of disaffected youth. I have never had so much fun in my life, and the kicker was that it was all a joke.

With eighteen Arts Program credits, Pat and I managed to limp into Junior Year. The Thunderbirds went through var-

ious permutations, as band members with more serious academic aspirations found the time demands of driving around the Dakotas and Iowa impinging on their GPAs. Pat had a serious girlfriend who loved him for his soul and was not put off by his teeth, and I was now rooming with the lead singer, who was a senior. The Thunderbirds continued to play on weekends, though in deference to academic excellence, we cut back to no more than one night per weekend, and no more than two weekends per month. With the graduation of the lead singer, and his decamping for Geology graduate school in Texas, the band took an extended hiatus.

As our senior year moved into Winter Term, Pat was beginning to break down. His room in Severance featured easy access to a warren of other rooms via the roof, and a closet was wired for sound and equipped for serious pharmacological experiments. A crowd was always in his room, at all hours of the day and night. Pat was sleeping less and less, and he was hearing voices.

In those days, and I would guess still today, Carleton was, in extreme form, tolerant of aberrant behavior. I remember a sophomore from LaCrosse who was clearly psychotic, and who would walk into the rooms of people who did not know him, and then stand silently until someone could coax him out again. Pat was always fascinated by the people perceived to be the misfits, and struck up a friendship with this poor disturbed pariah. Pat borrowed a car and spent nearly a week driving the guy all over Wisconsin searching for some supposedly inherited property that the student’s step-father was wrongfully withholding. After this trip, the guy left Carleton, and some time later, we learned that he had killed his step-father.

The voices Pat was hearing were those of people he knew. When he would respond to the voices, he was puzzled by the reactions of the people around him, who seemed to be pretending that they didn’t hear the same voices. The puzzlement

gave way to suspicion that people he thought of as friends were trying to play with his mind. Pat and our lead guitarist drove down to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, and promptly got arrested. Upon their return to Carleton, there were court dates, legal bills, fines, and other financial stresses that they covered by turning their pharmacological interests into commercial pursuits.

By this time, I had long since stopped hanging around. I didn’t understand anything about schizophrenia and auditory hallucinations. I thought Pat’s increasingly bizarre behavior was directly related to what he was consuming with both hands. I was a little scared of the crowd in Pat’s room, not so much the individuals, but the dynamics. In December, I had developed a lollapalooza of a case of mononucleosis, was hospitalized for two weeks, lost forty pounds, and missed the first half of Winter Term. When I came back, I mostly stayed in my room in Burton.

The Dean’s Office became aware of Pat’s increasingly disruptive and disturbing antics, and after monitoring him for some time, decided that he might pose a danger to himself or others. The plan was to get him to the State Hospital in Anoka for observation and diagnosis. Some of Pat’s friends were recruited to lure him into a car, and accompany him to Anoka. I couldn’t do it. On the way up to the hospital, Pat sensed that something was going on, and bolted from the car. The friends had to chase him down, and force him back into the car, a task that was significantly complicated by the fact that Pat was a big galoot and a very good athlete.

They eventually succeeded, and Pat spent the next several weeks in the State Hospital. The psychiatrists medicated him, the voices stopped, and we even got him back for a reunion gig at Carleton with the lead singer just before school let out and I had my Commencement.

PATRICK ♦ A4

# NEWS

## PATRICK FROM A4

That summer, I sold my Hammond organ to finance a trip to Europe, where I wore a beret, brooded in cafes, and wrote in notebooks. Upon running out of money, I returned to the U.S. and lived for a year in Phoenix.

I eventually found my way back to Minnesota, and Pat and I re-formed our college summer occupation of house painting, with a high school friend of Pat's, improbably named Tom Muscle. Pat had stopped taking his medications. We talked for the first time about his schizophrenia, and Pat said that he could now recognize the signs and symptoms, and control them. The medications made his hands shake, and he was orally compulsive, so he was gaining weight and chain-smoking. Pat was always an affable, gregarious soul who made friends easily, and he had made many friends in his now several trips to the State Hospital. When one of his friends was released, Pat would find him, and bring him to where we were painting. Pat would paint for a bit, then go driving around with his friends.

This was an election year, and Tom was vitally interested in politics. Eugene McCarthy was mounting a third-party campaign for President. McCarthy came to speak at the old Leamington Hotel in downtown Minneapolis, and Tom wanted to hear the speech. He took Pat along. They figured there would be a throng to hear McCarthy, so they got to the hotel early. They were standing at the elevators, waiting to go up to the room where McCarthy would be speaking, when the elevator doors opened, and out stepped Eugene McCarthy. Tom and Pat introduced themselves, and said they had come to hear the

speech. McCarthy invited them to have breakfast with him. I can imagine the look on McCarthy's face when he gradually discerned that he was having breakfast with someone suffering active delusions.

The breakfast convinced Pat that he and McCarthy were tight. Pat loved to develop plots for what he called "The Big Score." One of his friends from the State Hospital was convinced that he had invented the new generation of super computer, but was being prevented from marketing his invention because of the great conspiracy of IBM. Pat naturally found his friend's claim to be completely credible. Pat's Big Score consisted of having McCarthy announce that if elected, he would introduce perfect democracy in the U.S. The issues of the day would be debated on television on Saturdays, then using special voting boxes installed in every home in America, every citizen would vote on the issues, with Pat's friend's super computer tallying the votes. Pat would get a royalty on every voting box installed. Everybody wins.

This idea grew in an obsession for Pat. I tried to reason with him, thinking that might help, but finally Pat asked me to stop talking to him about it. He started creating long lists of people he could trust to help him with the project. He stopped coming to paint, and a few days later, I heard he was back in the hospital.

Over the next several years, I moved around a bit, living in Chicago and New York. I lost track of Pat, though it embarrasses me to admit that I did not look for him very hard. He was in and out of the hospital a lot. When he was out of the hospital,

he was the beneficiary of programs like subsidized housing that had maximum income thresholds that basically prevented him from holding a normal job. Instead, he lived on the West Bank of the University of Minnesota, and supported himself in the underground economy. Somewhere along the way, he married three times, and had three children.

In the mid-'nineties, the Thunderbirds got together to play for a Carleton Reunion. It

wanted to enter in a national spicy food contest in Kansas City. In an apartment over Lake Street in Minneapolis, they cooked up a vat of sauce, ladled it into jars, boxed it up and hauled it to Kansas City, where it was named "The Best Barbeque Sauce on the Planet." They had entered the sauce in two other national competitions, in Albuquerque and San Francisco, and had won both of those, too. In the midst of this, Pat had gone to his friend's house one

ting fees are not cheap, and represented many thousand dollars more than Pat and his wife had to their names. Pat sought partners, tried to sell directly to selected stores, tried to get his sauce into Schwan home delivery trucks, but couldn't get over the hump, and meanwhile, was running up a staggering load of credit card debt. In addition to me, other Carleton friends tried to help him. Pat reacted as he had to such problems all his life, by becoming obsessive about it.

jumped into the cold lake. He was dead before the family could get him to shore.

The bench is a peculiar way to remember someone like Pat, and I'm sure his spirit is as thoroughly amused by the existence and placement of the plaque as those of us who knew him well. Pat's constant and overflowing kindness deserved better – from the fates, and from his friends, especially me. I am haunted by the memories of missed opportunities to step up and be a positive force for him, and in that sense, Pat's bench represents a reproach for me, and a poignant regret at my failed or inadequate efforts over these many years to help a dear friend who really needed it.

As a typical adult, I am solemnly advising you to do as I say, not as I do. I can't re-live the lost moments, so I'm telling this story to you. The favor I ask of you is this: In the midst of the hullabaloo over your graduation, find a quiet moment and go to Sayles-Hill. Sit down for a spell on Pat's bench and think about the one or two people in your life who have really made a difference for you, through whose sensibilities you filter the world. Then resolve with all your heart to be a better friend to them than I was to Pat. I will draw some measure of comfort from the knowledge that someone has sat in this spot and honored Pat's memory.

My Commencement speech to you is this: College gears you for success, but the simple fact is, merit doesn't always carry the day; some days it rains. Hard friendship is one of the many crucibles of your soul. Your ability to make the hard ones satisfying will say more about who you are than just about anything else you will take away from Northfield.

*"I will draw some measure of comfort from the knowledge that someone has sat in this spot and honored Pat's memory."*

- JEFF SLOCUM '74

was like old times. The band still sucked, but we had better equipment, and we spent much of the weekend howling with laughter. Pat had gained a lot of weight, and he still chain-smoked, but he seemed happy. He had also, I noticed, become quite an accomplished player of the blues. As we were loading the cars to go home and saying our good byes, Pat asked me, "So, is it okay to call you now?" The question jarred me, as I had never really admitted to myself that I was avoiding him. I gave him a laughing reassurance, but I had new family obligations of my own, and we never got together.

Out of the blue one day, Pat called me at my office, wanting to see me immediately. I met him at a bar in the Warehouse District, and he told me a wild story about barbeque sauce. Pat and his wife were helping a friend formulate a sauce that the friend

morning to find the friend dead on the floor. When the police finished their investigation, Pat and his mother (who had lent the enterprise money) found themselves the owners of "The Upper Mississippi Sauce Company." Pat persuaded the Gedney Pickle Company to bottle the sauce for him, and Pat wanted my advice on how to get the sauce into grocery stores, where surely the Big Score, at long last, awaited him.

I put Pat together with some people who know the food business. The problem, they explained to Pat, was that in order to be distributed into grocery store chains, Pat needed to go through the big wholesalers. The wholesalers would distribute Pat's sauce, and take a cut of the sales, but before they would distribute anything, they needed to be paid what are called warehouse "slotting fees." The slot-

ting fees are not cheap, and represented many thousand dollars more than Pat and his wife had to their names. Pat sought partners, tried to sell directly to selected stores, tried to get his sauce into Schwan home delivery trucks, but couldn't get over the hump, and meanwhile, was running up a staggering load of credit card debt. In addition to me, other Carleton friends tried to help him. Pat reacted as he had to such problems all his life, by becoming obsessive about it.

The Thunderbirds last got together for a Carleton Reunion in 2004. One of our drummers, about whom I could write another of these, had died one year before, so it was a bittersweet weekend. Pat had been diagnosed with congestive heart failure just before we played, and he brought his charts down to Northfield to show our lead guitarist, now a nationally prominent cardiologist. The guitarist quietly told me that Pat was in bad shape, and could die soon. Two weeks after Carleton's Reunion, at a family reunion at a lake in Wisconsin, Pat was horsing around with some kids, and