

In Search of the
Perfect
Onion Ring

A Son's Stories of Life, Death,
Cancer & His Dad

By Chris Kern



Open Door Publications

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Memories have their own truth, and this book reflects only my own memories and recollections of events and people. I've included only first names, to respect people's privacy, and of course, some of the dialogue is recreated. I hope that anyone mentioned here will enjoy my memories of them.

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For Mom and Dad



Frank Kern

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*Frantically a man flailed
Water splashed
He called to those nearby and to those he could not see
Life vests and buoys were thrown, without success
No boats could be found
Without options, rescuers retreated
Desperately fighting, arms waving,
his head bobbed above and below the water
He gasped for air
Still pleading and flailing
the tired man slid under the surface*

Diagnosis

Chris Kern

I met my dad at the doctor's office near his home. It was a cold winter day. I had no idea of the road that lay ahead for both of us. I wondered why the heck he'd asked me to be there. Dad was quite capable of going to the doctor alone. He was mobile and in good health. He drove there. He walked in. He filled out his paperwork himself.

The first sign of Dad getting sick had been just a few days after Christmas. We spent Christmas Day together hanging out at my house (his old house, which I had bought from him and Mom when they moved to a smaller apartment). We ate, watched TV, and exchanged gifts. While quiet, it was a good day.

My sister had warned me of his yellow skin tone. Dad had a neighbor, Gretchen, who was in her 90s. My sister told me that Gretchen told Dad his color looked just fine. I met Gretchen many times in the months to come. She was a very nice, friendly woman who Dad helped with delivering her mail. Gretchen must have been color-blind, because that day at the doctor's office, the Dad I was looking at was the color of a yellow legal pad.



I was fortunate to know Trudie. We met while we were both salespeople for a wholesale plant nursery in Iowa. I saw her mostly at trade shows. She introduced me to some good nursery people, and was always very helpful.

She and I became friends and did a fair number of partnership business deals together over a few years. Trudie never let me down. We never had to write even a penny's worth of credit for any deal we did together. We talked often about availabilities, prices, shipping, and such. Trudie had pancreatic cancer and passed away not too long prior to my dad's diagnosis. Even during some of her sickest moments she would talk to me on the phone. She promised things would get done, and they always did.

I didn't know anything about pancreatic cancer prior to hearing Trudie's diagnosis. I remember being on my upstairs porch, speaking to a friend on the phone about her. A quick Google inquiry opened my eyes to this killer. I recalled the five-year survival rate was about five percent, and one-year rates were not much higher.

When my dad was diagnosed in late December 2011, I knew he had been given a death sentence. I did the math in my head. I would not travel for work that summer.

I spoke with Trudie's son, James, who had taken over her accounts. I asked about her illness, and what to expect with my dad. He talked freely. I felt for him. I feared for my dad. I feared for me.



There are lots of tough guys in the world. I had one friend who worked a summer on an Alaskan fishing boat. His uncle owned a fleet of them, but he could not tell anyone for fear of being singled out. He hated it. Fish, fish, fish, then go to port and watch all his tough guy shipmates pick fights at the bar. Another friend Jeff was a Marine who, upon discharge, did some very deep undercover work, so secretive he couldn't even tell you who he was working for, let alone what he was doing. With only one finger, he could drop you to your knees and make you beg to be released.

Dad was not a tough guy. He headed in the opposite direction from confrontation. It's not that he let people walk all over him. He ran companies. He sat on local boards. There must have been conflict, and he must have handled it well, because there was very little turnover in the organizations he ran. He handled most issues in a manner much more dignified than I would have. I tend to be mouthy, direct, and go against the grain. I was probably good practice for Dad.

Once, I saw my dad stand up for himself. It wasn't just for himself, but for the entire Kern family. I witnessed the short exchange. I was shocked. It was not like my dad. There was no backing down. No hesitation. No question in his mind. He knew he was firmly in the right. He was a gentleman. Someone drew a line in the sand, and Dad walked right up to it and took one step over it.

Fuck You, Asswipe.

Those would have been my words, but I never got the chance. Dad's way was much more dignified.



In Search of the Perfect Onion Ring

I know an MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) fighter. Drank beer with him more than once. My son Clint is friends with him. I would not want to get on his bad side in a fight. Dad was not a person who would step into a Mixed Martial Arts cage match and come out a winner. Dad's strength came from deep within, an unwavering rock solid foundation of strength. It is a strength that only comes from faith. But time and time again I witnessed his strength. Time and time again others told me of his strength.



Chris Kern

In the last few years, after Dad retired and Mom was gone, he called pretty much every day, and often stopped by unannounced when in the area. I was usually “busy,” and would make myself take a breath, get off the phone with a customer, or stop what “important” thing I was doing to spend a few moments with Dad. His unannounced visits annoyed me.

A year or two before he got sick we fell into the routine of having dinner together about once a week. Maybe a little more. We usually spent an hour or maybe two together, which was plenty for both of us! I was glad to have dinner with Dad and I enjoyed our time together. With that said, though, when I get a rare headache it is stress related. I feel horrible saying it now, but I would usually leave Dad with a headache, and have to take a couple of aspirin chased with a beer. Sometimes I just went ahead and took them before dinner. Dad may well have done the same.



In Search of the Perfect Onion Ring

Dad had gotten forgetful. I laugh at it now but time after time *this* was one of the headache creating events. He had a funny habit of telling the same story over and over. Dad and I would be eating dinner, and he would start to tell a story. About a minute into it he would pause to ask, "Have I told you this before?" I would answer "yes." Almost as if deaf Dad would not react and just continue on with the story as if never having asked the question. He did this every time we were together, sometimes more than once. It became pretty funny once I began to anticipate it. In my mind I was shaking my head back and forth and saying "really," with a sarcastic smile on my face that said, "You are seriously doing this again?"

It pretty much never stopped, but after Dad got sick I became more appreciative of his stories, realizing someday they would stop and I better enjoy them while I could.

What I wouldn't give right now to spend an evening listening to my dad tell me the same story over and over a few times.



The year or two before Dad got sick, I occasionally sent my sister, Beth texts with a short, funny story about my dinner with Dad. She lived far away and did not see him often. In my mind, I wanted her to be prepared as I saw Alzheimer's in Dad's future. I didn't want her saying she had no idea and why didn't I say something. So, I sent a funny story here and there, usually related to some brain fart he was having. They were never mean-spirited, just funny old Dad stories. Beth enjoyed these stories and would often call after a text to follow up or laugh with me.

For these few years, Dad and I generally had quiet birthdays, Thanksgivings, and Christmases together. Since my divorce, Mom's passing, my three boys growing up, moving away, and having other places to be, things had changed for Dad and me.

At Christmas, Dad usually gave me a gift of a nice check, and maybe a small item he picked up. Buying my 80-year-old dad gifts was not easy. I usually gave him a book, maybe some clothes he didn't need, and a random stupid item I'd see at the store that never got used. He had grown to like feeding birds, so he could always use fifty pounds of sunflower seeds. I had to stop buying him different types of new birdfeeders because I learned that if I got him a new birdfeeder, soon the (completely fine) old feeder would show up at my house destined for my yard. He really didn't want MORE feeders.

The last Christmas we were together I handed him a card with \$200 worth of restaurant gift cards. As I handed it to him I said, "I know I always give you these, but I kind of enjoy spending time with you." He opened the card then handed me a card saying, "I feel the same way!"

I opened my card, which also contained various restaurant gift cards!



I tend to find way too many things that I can do tomorrow. Why get in a hurry? Why get stressed? Do it tomorrow. It's not going anywhere...or is it?

The closer to home it is, the more I tend to put it off. Forty-seven years ago, Dad moved back to Evansville with Mom, my sister, and I to become the Executive Director of the Evansville Association for the Blind, a sheltered workshop for the visually impaired and handicapped. Over the years, I watched the transformation of the EAB under his direction as it grew and grew and grew until the most recent expansion. Now the building covers the entire city block. It was so big in its heyday Kmart purchased over a million dollars' worth of mops from them; they also assembled parts, did packaging, and other normal and odd jobs for Whirlpool, Berry Plastics, Inland Container and other local and national companies.

I was understandably impressed, as were others I know, when the last big expansion was named to honor my father. There on the new brick building were the letters, "Evansville Association for the Blind FRANK E. KERN BUILDING" standing out in white.

Glen, a close friend, asked if I had a photo of Dad standing in front of the building. I said no, but I would get one. Years and years went by, and I never got the photo. The building was going nowhere. Neither was Dad.

As I sat in the hospital with my dad knowing his condition, it bothered me for days, really bothered me. That building kept crossing my mind. As luck would have it, Dad was released late one afternoon. We pulled out of the hospital, located a few blocks from the EAB, onto Virginia Street. I headed west toward Dad's and, as we approached the building without driving one inch out of our way, I pulled over and said, "Let's get a photo of you and your building."

The late afternoon sun perfectly lit the side of the building. Dad posed for his photo without protest. He was probably wondering what took me so long!



Chris Kern

I've always been amazed at the lack of protest from loved ones when taking photos toward the end of their lives. I think they know these could likely be some of the last photos of them. Sitting at the kitchen table, or in the recliner, lying in hospital beds wearing hospital gowns, sporting unmade hair, sitting in wheelchairs, all the family gathers around and, if possible, they hand the sick person the baby to hold. We were fortunate to have months to take photos with Dad. There are lots of smiling faces, and no shortage of smiles from Dad himself.



On the way to St. Louis, Missouri, Dad wanted to stop at Missionary Oblates of Mary, just across the border in Belleville, Illinois, to see a retired priest who long ago had been helpful to Dad.

Dad had helped set up a radio reading service for the blind in the Evansville area. This priest had done the same in his area, and shared his experiences with Dad. When we arrived, Dad did his thing: asked questions and tracked the priest down on the large grounds. The retired priest was busy with a group of mostly wheelchair-bound residents all circled around playing some kind of fishing game. Each had a pole and was trying to “catch” fish on the floor.

The priest, who was also in a wheelchair, was wheeled into the hall. Dad explained who he was and why he was there. Probably forty years had passed since the 90-plus-year-old priest last saw my father. I stood off to the side after meeting the priest, and tried not to interfere. After some conversation, the priest recalled those earlier years and the help he offered. I was touched by Dad’s sincere appreciation of the priest’s contribution years before. The visit did not last very long. The priest wanted to return to his game and his friends. He called Dad and I together before we left and offered a prayer.



About three weeks after finding out Dad had pancreatic cancer, we went to St. Louis, Missouri, for a second opinion from a specialist surgeon. It is an easy three-hour drive from Evansville to St. Louis. We decided to catch a St. Louis Blues hockey game. We arrived in St. Louis early and parked at Union Station, a few blocks from the arena. We walked around Union Station and grabbed a bite to eat. We went up to the hotel and sat in the lobby. I had a beer. Norah Jones music was playing. The architecture was outstanding. Dad slept in a lounge chair. The peacefulness made it easy to surrender and forget what brought us here.

Close to game time we picked up our tickets at Will Call and headed to our seats. I wanted to get great seats because I figured this would be the last pro hockey game Dad ever saw. We had center ice seats about six rows off the ice. Because Dad was so close to the ice, I could tell he was having difficulty following the puck. We usually sat up higher at our local hockey games where, I did not realize until that moment, he could follow the puck more easily. I watched the crowd above us slowly file in. Two young guys were sitting in aisle seats about twenty rows above us. On my way to the concessions I pointed out our seats, explained Dad was having difficulty seeing the puck, and asked if they would consider trading seats after the first period. They looked at me like I was nuts and said sure! We ended up in their seats, and Dad was much happier.

After the game the crowd was moving fast, and Dad was moving slow. I did my best to block and protect him with my body. It was cold, which was hard on him. In just walking those few blocks I could see how much he had declined physically in the past few years. I had never noticed it before.

The next day the surgeon asked Dad if he was capable of walking up three flights of stairs and Dad said yes. He probably could, but not brisk, and not twice. Surgery was going to be harder on him than I suspected only a few days before.



About the Author

Chris Kern has lived most of his life in Evansville, Indiana. He has traveled throughout the world, from Europe to Central and South America, and throughout the United States.

He received a degree in marketing from the University of Evansville, and much of his career has involved plants: in sales as a wholesale horticulture representative and broker, as well as planting them and photographing them. You have probably seen his photographic work; he has sold thousands of photographs



to the nursery industry to be used on plant tags, in catalogs, websites, and even on trucks.

He currently lives on forty acres in southern Indiana with his dog, Kain, where his hobbies are hunting, fishing, and cooking. He has three grown sons and a very new grandson.

You can find out more about him at ChrisKern.com.