

Gordon Joinville – A City of San Mateo Fallen Hero

Part 4 – The Legacy

On October 5, 1968, the City of San Mateo held a dedication ceremony at the opening of their new municipal swim pool on Kehoe Avenue. The new swim center, **Joinville Pool** (adjacent to Bayside Middle School), was dedicated in the memory of slain San Mateo Police officer, **Gordon R. Joinville**, who was shot and killed four months earlier. Present at the ribbon-cutting ceremony were members of the San Mateo City Council, the mayor, and members of the San Mateo Park and Recreation Commission. Sergeant Joinville was also memorialized at the San Mateo County Hall of Justice, the Peace Officers Memorial in Sacramento, the National Peace Officers Memorial in Washington D.C., and on numerous Internet sites. Included in the inscription on the commemorative plaque in the Joinville Pool lobby is:



A GENTLEMAN AND A FRIEND OF YOUTH.

So why had Gordon Joinville, in just 12 years on the San Mateo police force, come to be regarded as "a gentleman and a friend of youth"? Any peace officer killed in the line of duty will be memorialized. However, the outpouring of praise and admiration in Joinville's case was overwhelming.

The people whose lives he touched, both young and old, were forever changed by his tenderness and love. How is it that he developed into such a fine person and "Policeman's Policeman"?

One would expect that the seeds of his personality were developed at an early age, in a close, loving, and stable home environment.

If fact, family life in his early years were filled with instability and insecurity. At best, his could be described as a difficult childhood.



He was born Gordon Robert Schaefer on July 30, 1933. He had two younger sisters, Shirley, born in 1934, and Joyce, born in 1937. Their parents, Rose and Adolph Schaefer, raised their family in San Francisco until 1943 when they announced to the three children that they were going to be divorced. Shirley, Gordon's younger sister, was completely devastated by the announcement and felt terribly responsible for the breakup of her parents' marriage. Immediately, all three children were placed in boarding schools--Gordon in Christian Brothers School in Berkeley and the two girls in Dominican Convent in San Francisco. Gordon remained in the boarding school for four years during which time he had very little contact with his other family members.

In 1947 Rose remarried to George "Joe" Joinville at which time all three children took on the Joinville surname. The family then reunited and moved to Sparks, Nevada, where Joe was employed at Swift and Company in Reno.

While attending junior high school in Sparks, Shirley tells of an incident that may have shaped Gordon's future. In Shirley's own words:

"One time, on Halloween, he took a bevy of girls trick or treating. They wanted to 'let down the lights'. (A favorite activity for the night, street lights used to be drawn up and down on chains, for changing bulbs). That night, as they were letting the lights down, a police car started to chase them. The girls, being girls, ran straight down the middle of the street. Gordon waved the police car down to 'save' them, was arrested and taken to jail. Joe and Rose were in the middle of a bridge party when the cops arrived to tell them of the arrest. Joe went down to the police station and was gone for hours (I remember!) When Gordon and Joe came home in the wee hours of the morning, Gordon reported to me that he and the police officers spent hours telling each other what each of them had done as pranks on past Halloweens! The next day at school, Gordon was the hero of all of the girls!"



Shirley and Gordon
8th Grade, Sparks, Nev.

In a telephone interview with Shirley, she explained that when Gordon saw the police car coming, he "saved" the girls by showing them where to hide so that he could take the entire blame himself for lowering the streetlights. The police did not press charges and Gordon got off with only a friendly warning.

Could this encounter with the policeman in Sparks, Nevada, when he was a teen have been a defining moment in his life? Instead of being penalized, he was taught a lesson in a way that ended up being a pleasant experience. No doubt the good feeling that Gordon felt after his encounter with the police was amplified when he became the hero of the girls at school! Perhaps this is when Gordon Joinville, consciously or unconsciously, decided that he wanted to help others in same manner that he was helped.

Bob Livingstone, a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), has been working with San Mateo families since 1987. Here is what he has to say about Gordon's Halloween incident in Sparks:

"Those who have been abused or neglected as children become the walking wounded, with low self-esteem, a tendency to blame themselves for all the wrong that has become them, with feelings of hopelessness and lack of trust. That has a good chance of improving if the abused/neglected child has a positive experience with an adult where he feels loved and cared for unconditionally. This moment of positive regard is so antithetical to his life experience, that he embraces this memory like vice-grip. It can drastically alter deep despair into dreams of love and accomplishment. It is how we define the word miracle."

The Joinville family remained together in northern Nevada for the next three or four years. During their last year in Sparks, Gordon came down with a skin condition. He was bed-ridden for the entire school year with skin that peeled off. Each night he was treated with a

bath of Epsom Salts. After Rose and Joe got summer jobs at nearby Lake Tahoe, California, they took Gordon there with them. Within two weeks he was almost completely healed. Shirley reports that his symptoms seemed to be caused by the extreme alkali in Nevada's water. He never went back to Sparks. Instead, Gordon was sent back to the Christian Brothers boarding school in Berkeley. He remained for another year and was able to make up for the lost year of schooling. Meanwhile, the rest of the family relocated to San Francisco, and shortly thereafter to San Luis Obispo, California.

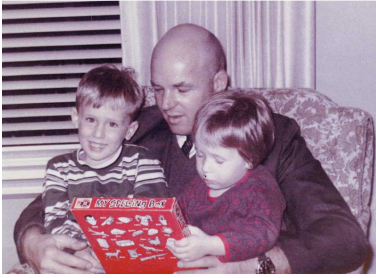
More remembrances from his younger sister, Shirley:

"As I remember him, he was my hero from my earliest years. I followed him like his shadow and he always seemed to be fine with that. He was always a leader. In fact, when he died, a Sparks High School reunion book was dedicated to him....and he never attended High School in Sparks, but graduated from the junior high school. He was the kind of a kid that thought about wearing green hair for St. Patrick's Day, back in the day that no one had that kind of imagination! He was very, very intelligent (tested as near genius, according to my mother), and hauled many of us through math and science. His particular skill was to do it without making us feel that we were all blooming idiots for not catching on. He did not 'see' a handicap, in fact his first date was with a girl whose arm would fall out of its socket. Her parents taught him how to put it back in and sent them on their way. He liked to get a group of kids and go out into the country and camp overnight. He always organized it, and because of his reputation, other kids could join him. The other boys saw him as a boys' boy, the girls saw him as 'safe,' cute, and fun. And yet, his hobby was opera. He was a voracious reader. He was allergic to the sun, so learned to be a professional scuba diver and spelunker. (He checked the pipes, under the ocean in San Francisco Bay for heavens sake!) He told me that he had drawn his gun only twice in his professional life, and never used it during the course of an incident. We did have a difficult childhood, and thankfully must have had a solid foundation from somewhere for, as the Menninger's have said, 'Good mental health is the ability to adjust to changing situations.' Joyce became a very successful elementary school teacher, I became a child and family therapist (MFCC), and Gordon became a 'policeman's policeman'."

After high school, Gordon spent two years in the Navy at Corpus Christi, Texas, where he was trained to be a jet engine mechanic. He was immediately discharged when it was discovered that he had double-vision. As soon as Gordon left the Navy he returned to northern California and soon thereafter entered the police academy. After a very short courtship, he married a woman who, prior to their wedding day, did not tell him that she suffered from the effects of rheumatic fever. She died nine months later. Not long after that, he married for a second time. Within a year, he discovered that his new bride was not faithful. A divorce was finalized two years later. There were no children from either of his first two marriages.



Step-Father, Mother, Gordon



Gordon met his third wife, Margaret, in 1959. During their courtship she became a certified scuba diver, just like him. They were married in October 1961 and settled in San Mateo. Their marriage was rock solid for the six-plus years remaining years of his life. They had two children, a boy and a girl, born in 1964 and 1965. After Gordon was killed in 1968, Margaret found it necessary to finish her college degree. While raising two small children this was

not an easy task. It took her eight years to graduate but she ended up with a distinguished career in clinical lab science at Valley Medical Center in San Jose, specializing in diagnostic blood chemistry. During her 28-year career, Margaret lectured medical school residents at Stanford University and for the Center For Disease Control. She retired in 2005 and still resides in northern California. She never remarried.

Gordon's remembrance is forever in Margaret's thoughts. (She can easily recite the number of years, months, days, and hours of their marriage.) She is inspired by his memory and the love that he expressed for her, their children, and all the young people he helped in his police work. Quoting Margaret:

I have always tried, in Gordon's memory, to keep upbeat and happy, no matter how difficult life has been, as I was so very blessed knowing Gordon. His Step-Dad, Mom, and Shirley were all just as wonderful in my life.

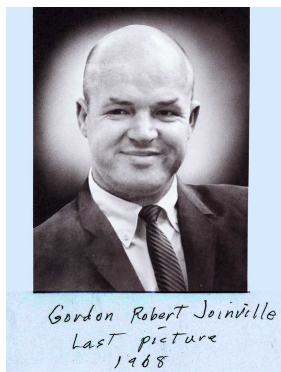
Detective Sergeant Gordon R. Joinville remains the only police officer in the history of the San Mateo Police Department to ever lose his life in the line of duty.

Joinville Swim Center and Park (as it is now called) is a most appropriate memorial for such a fine gentleman and friend of youth. The pool serves the City of San Mateo as the only year round public swimming facility. Thousands of children have learned to swim in the pool's summer programs over the years, including both Joinville children. The pool is also used for recreational swimming, lap swimming, the San Mateo Master Marlins adult swim team, and several adult swim-fit programs. With his love of the water and young people, Gordon Joinville would have been pleased to see how his memory is memorialized.



It was, in all likelihood, the Sparks policeman on that Halloween night that motivated Gordon Joinville to become the fine, loving man he became. It didn't have to be a policeman to have

inspired him; it could just as easily have been an uncle, a coach, a scout leader, an athlete, or a school teacher.



Gordon Joinville's story should not be lost in history. It is important we realize that people's lives are shaped by those with whom they interact. He was sent on his all-too-short life journey of helping young people by the kindness and compassion of a caring and understanding policeman. He taught the lesson he learned that Halloween night to others many times over.

Gordon Joinville left as his legacy all the children he helped as a policeman and all people who learned to swim and enjoy the Joinville Swim Center.

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If you have something to add, correct, or would like to comment on this story, the author would like to hear from you, **ESPECIALLY IF YOU ARE, OR KNOW OF ONE OF "GORDON'S KIDS."** Your right to privacy and confidentiality will be respected.

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- San Mateo Public Library (San Mateo Times archives)
- . . . and all the hundreds of "Gordon's Kids" whose identities shall remain confidential

Bob Leuten
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