

# Saying thank you to 'the best crossing guard'

It was a beautiful fall morning as I walked my three-year-old standard poodle, Lily, through the colourful forests and streets of Iroquois Ridge in northeast Oakville about five years ago.

Our route was constantly evolving, however, after a very special encounter that day it frequently included a visit with a most remarkable man.

As we rounded Bayshire Drive to head back through a favourite wooded path, there was a gathering of people and their pet dogs lined up next to a diminutive crossing guard, his name was Francis Kozlowski, at the main entrance to St. Marguerite d'Youville Elementary School.

While approaching the group, Lily became excited about all the activity and the crossing guard turned to greet her with a friendly smile:

"Well who do we have here?" When he offered her a treat she was somewhat hesitant, but his soothing voice and engaging manner soon won her over.

From that day forward my dog, like so many others before and after her, had a new best friend.

While Francis was a highly conscientious crossing guard first and foremost, during his retirement years including his last seven serving the students and parents at St. Marguerite, for those of us lucky enough to know him he was much more.

His deep respect for the thousands of children who safely crossed his path was evident in the joyous daily greetings, treats at Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day and Easter, not to mention the jokes and brainteasers that he loved to challenge them with.

Francis had a zest for life that was infectious and a huge passion for people, politics, sports and perhaps most of all, dogs of all shapes and sizes. He was the 'Pied Piper of Puppies' and some days they would be lined up four or five deep for their audience, which was always topped off with a special cookie or three. Lily nearly tore my shoulders out of their sockets each and every time she was within eyesight of her new best friend.

Meeting Francis transported me back to a time, not so long ago, when we all had a greater sense of the power of communication and community.

He was a compelling hybrid of town crier, especially when motorists sped through his world, morning sports anchor as he updated his entourage on the latest hockey, baseball or football scores and political pundit as he occasionally took to his prominent soapbox to weigh in on current affairs.

Francis was a humble man by nature, but with considerable confidence and no shortage of opinion. He had a lifelong passion for sports, and was drafted as a promising prospect by the New York Yankees — the second greatest love of his life after



Francis Kozlowski

his wife and soul mate, Renee Naiman.

Francis was also an accomplished golfer and played frequently with long-time buddies right up until his final season.

One of Francis' greatest strengths was his indomitable spirit, which ensured that he rarely got too down, unless, of course, his beloved Yankees were out of the pennant race.

He openly shared with me that he won his battle with prostate cancer and I then shared with him

the immense grief that I was experiencing, at the time, after losing one of my closest childhood friends to a massive stroke.

Visiting Francis became an important part of my life, and highly therapeutic, as I was inspired by his positive attitude and unbridled enthusiasm for "being on the right side of the grass."

I actually missed him during school breaks, and particularly over the summer holidays, always looking forward to his return. Eventually, I realized

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I would have thanked him for helping make our community a safer, better place, particularly for the children and their puppies, as the best crossing guard any of us had ever met. Most of all, I would have finally had the chance to thank him for helping a stranger through the most difficult time of his life.

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Jeffrey Peckitt,  
Oakville

that he wasn't just Lily's new best friend.

In late 2010, I noticed that he seemed out of sorts and asked him about it. He told me that he had to go for some "routine" tests and that "it was nothing to worry about" and he would be back in "no time at all."

Lily and I would pass by each day, and she would look all around for Francis, but he was nowhere to be found.

The weeks turned into months, and on several occasions I asked the replacement crossing guards if they knew anything about Francis. No one had any information.

There is a sixth sense that many often experience in friendships and I had a haunting feeling of loss each time I looked down Bayshire Drive to that familiar crossing guard post.

I eventually altered my route, perhaps in denial, to avoid dealing with the uncertainty and questions that would come upon seeing his vacant spot as I reflected on the many fond memories.

Francis had passed away after a brief, but very brave, battle with esophageal cancer that spring, at age 65 with his beloved wife, Renee, at his side.

Like many others who live up on Iroquois Ridge, Lily and I never had a chance to say goodbye to our new best friend.

I would have thanked him for his generosity of spirit, his quick wit, compassion and empathy for others.

I would have thanked him for helping make our community a safer, better place, particularly for the children and their puppies, as the best crossing guard any of us had ever met.

Most of all, I would have finally had the chance to thank him for helping a stranger through the most difficult time of his life.

Jeffrey Peckitt, Oakville

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