

JanzAtLarge



WILLIAM JANZ

Their friendship defied age gap and a last wish

A woman's dying wish was ignored because children loved her too much to obey her.

Irene Koegel had no children, had never married, had nearly no family and asked that no funeral service be held. But she had been friends with elementary school children, and the kids, and a teacher, Sherry Power, decided to ignore her wishes.

"She can come back and haunt me, I'll be glad to see her," Power said and smiled.

The children from Hillside Elementary School in Brookfield, and their parents, gathered for a memorial service at the home of one of the parents. Several children gave little speeches about their friend, who was 80 years older than they were.

The kids had visited her, gone on field trips with her, shared holiday programs and had seen her do significant things: eat hot dogs, hug, and thank them with her eyes when a stroke made it impossible for her to do it with words.

For the sake of both, Power brings second-graders to elders who live at St. John's Tower, 1840 N. Prospect Ave. When Miss Koegel, who was 87, was dying, a child gave her a Beanie Baby, with wings, and she hugged it to her chest.

"I knew right then how special these children were to her," Cathy Markey, one of the parents, said.

So the children, their parents, and some of Miss Koegel's friends from St. John's Tower premeditatedly and respectfully disobeyed her last wishes. At the memorial service, kids shared letters they had written to Miss Koegel's niece.

"Don't feel bad. You will remember Miss Koegel and I will too. I feel sad that Miss Koegel died. . . . I know how it feels because my gold fish died. Love Joey."

"I'm sorry that your aunt died. . . . Too bad she had a stroke. It is good that she lived for 10 days after she had the stroke. My dog died when I was 2 years old. I felt very sad. Her name was Snowflake. She was a poodle. Love Sammy."

"Your aunt was a very nice lady. She was a very pretty lady too. She had a very nice smile every day. She had the biggest smile I had ever seen before! When I heard that she died I was shocked to hear that because that was sad to hear! You were a very lucky person because you have Miss Koegel for an aunt. Love, Katelyn."

"I hope you feel okay. I'm sorry that Miss Koegel is dead. You feel bad. I'm sorry. I feel sad too. Is there anything I can do to help? I would be willing to help if you want me to. When I feel sad I go up to my room and think about it. Or I talk to my mom about it. Love, Jessica."

"I know it's hard. . . . When I was only 4 years old my hamster died. I was very very sad. I'm sure that (Miss Koegel) will have a nice time in heaven, but she still would like it better down here alive. Love Alyssa."

"I know how you feel when a person dies. My dog died too. I was sad. Think of what you liked about Miss Koegel. That's what I did and it made me feel better about it. What a week! You will feel a lot better! Love Katie."

"If you want to feel a little bit better, you could sit down and relax and think about when you played with her! Love, Oliver."

"I hope you feel better soon or should I say in a couple days? Miss Koegel was a very nice lady! My brother Patrick had Miss Koegel for a 'Forever Friend' and I wanted her really, really bad!! When I get really, really sad I cry and cry for a very long time. What do you do when you are really, really sad? Love, Alison."

The service for the woman who had no children ended with children singing her name.

Call Bill Janz at (414) 224-2170, e-mail him at wjanz@onwis.com, or write him at the Journal Sentinel, Box 661, Milwaukee 53201.