

Photos help keep their memories alive

By Ed Breen

I cannot get her image out of my mind. Reddish hair, pixie cut. A smile that could melt steel and eyes that simply sparkle, a highlight caught right in the edge of the of the brown pupil. Her white blouse starched and crisply ironed. And across the right breast, beneath the collar, her name is embroidered into the fabric: “Lorna Breen, M.D. Emergency Medicine Attending Physician”

New York Presbyterian Hospital, it tells me, this photograph of Dr. Lorna Breen – no relation; I wish she were. This photo of this bright, eager, perky 49-year-old was published last month with her obituary. And I cannot get past her.

I cannot let go of Lorna Breen, M.D., just as I cannot let go of Joe Joyce. I have pictures of each of them which I have clipped from the newspapers over the last couple of weeks.

Thousands have died; have succumbed to COVID-19. I know that. And I know that each of them, each of the nearly 75,000 had husbands, wives, children, friends,

colleagues from whom they have been taken. And you and I grieve collectively for each of them. For all of them.

It was the monster Josef Stalin who reminded us years ago about the failure of being human. It was he who told that that we see one death as a tragedy and a million deaths as a statistic. In a perverse way, of course, he was correct. I cannot know all of those people who have been claimed by the coronavirus. Indeed, I have been very fortunate in that I do not know personally, thus far, anyone who has been taken from me by it. I pray that it remains so.

But Lorna Breen and Joe Joyce. I never met either of them. And they are gone. Each gambled and I shall not say that they lost, Rather, they took great risk to do what they wanted to do, Lorna in her hospital and Joe at his bar, a place called JJ Bubbles in the Brooklyn, New York. He was there every day since 1977, right after he came back from Vietnam and decided being a barkeep was a pretty good contribution to humanity and made a de-



Joe Joyce

cent living. It was in the Bay Ridge neighborhood, the same place as “Saturday Night Fever” back in those days. Here’s how JJ Bubbles was described in Joe Joyce’s death notice:

“It became an institution: transit employees, iron-workers, teachers, sanitation guys, cops, firefighters, civil servants, accountants, retirees from all those occupations who, for the most part, sought their pleasures close to where they lived and, in many cases, where they had grown up. Neighborhood bars are places of consistency. For the near entirety of its existence, JJ



Dr. Lorna Breen

Bubbles kept only two kinds of beer on tap: Bud and Bud Light.”

Anyway, in March, Joe and Jane Joyce took a long-planned cruise to Spain, despite protests from their adult children that this was too risky, with the coronavirus spreading in Europe and especially Spain.

No, Joe said, it would be okay. He was 74 and healthy and besides, said his daughter, “he watched Fox News and believed it was under control.” They got home two weeks later, a day before New York shut down

He and his wife then

headed to their house in New Hampshire. Their children were checking in from New York and New Jersey, and on March 27, when daughter Kristen got off the phone with her father, she called an ambulance. He was wheezing. His oxygen level was low. On April 9, he died of Covid-19.

Lorna Breen knew the risks. She had contracted COVID-19 working in the vision of hell that New York hospitals had become by early April. She was young, active and otherwise healthy, so she survived and recovered, but took some time to regroup at her family home in Charlottesville, Va.

The daughter of a physician, she was doing what she was trained to do, what every fiber of her body told her she must do: Tending to the hundreds, thousands of stricken New Yorkers.

But on a Sunday last month, it all became too much. On that afternoon, the Charlottesville Police Department responded to a call seeking medical assistance.

“The victim was taken to

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A MOMENT
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U.V.A. Hospital for treatment, but later succumbed to self-inflicted injuries,” said an antiseptic statement from the police explaining the death of Dr. Lorna Breen, M.D.

She apparently had seen and felt just too much.

Said her father, “She tried to do her job, and it killed her.”

I don’t know why, but I must tuck away those snapshots of Lorna Breen and Joe Joyce. I just must.

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