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Common Ground: Nick Pattison '18 and William "Brownie" Brown, 101, forge a close friendship in "just passing the time"

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STUDENTS



COMMON GROUND

Nick Pattison '18 and William “Brownie” Brown, 101, forge a close friendship in “just passing the time”

By Gerry Boyle '78

It was lunchtime at a nursing home in Waterville, and Nick Pattison '18 had brought a feast: homemade venison sausage, pancakes, and cubes of cantaloupe, served on paper plates. Pattison's friend, William “Brownie” Brown, 101, sat in his easy chair as Pattison poured fresh maple syrup.

“Thank you, kind chef,” Brownie said, then turned to a visitor and said in a slow stage whisper. “Right out of the blue he'll come barging in.”

Every Sunday for more than a year and a half, Pattison has been “barging in” at Lakewood Continuing Care

Center, where Brownie lives. Pattison arrived as a hospice volunteer assigned to the then-99-year-old former hunting guide and retired paper-mill worker. “He turned out to be a pretty good guy, too,” Brownie said between long chews of sausage. “I wouldn't tell him that. He'd get a swelled head.”

Pattison grinned.

This scene is played out every Sunday. Sometimes Pattison's there for hours, lifting Brownie into his wheelchair for the ride to the activity room, saying,

“Ready to rock and roll?” When the activity (perhaps Bingo or a visiting singer) is over, Pattison brings Brownie back to his room, lifts him by the shoulders, and gently lowers him. “That’s how you do it when you’re a hundred and one,” Brownie said, easing back into his chair.

Mostly they talk, Pattison recounting the events of his day and listening as Brownie recalls running the boiler at the paper mill in Winslow, building a camp in Freedom, and buying his first car (a 1923 Willys Overland Red Bird). Sometimes, Brownie is a little under the weather and can’t get out of bed. “Usually I sort of hold his hand,” Pattison said.

The path that led Pattison from upstate New York to Brownie’s curtained room began in his first semester at Colby. Pattison said he was having trouble making the transition to college. His developmental psychology professor, Tarja Raag, suggested volunteering with hospice. Raag, who teaches lifespan development, thinks it’s important for people to be comfortable with death and the dying process.

“We isolate people who are dying in nursing homes and hospitals,” Raag said. “I think, honestly, the greatest thing you can give to another person is to be okay with them dying, and not make it about yourself. It’s just a great thing for a young person to cultivate.”

For Pattison and other students who take her advice (Raag estimates she has three or four students work with hospice each semester), death becomes okay.

Pattison has been assigned an older woman dying of lung disease, a man in the last stages of dementia, another man who died before they could meet. For the next six months, Pattison took it upon himself to assist the man’s widow, mowing her lawn, helping her pack up her house so she could move to Texas where her daughter lived. They became friends before she moved.

“You develop a relationship with your hospice clients, and then they die,” he said. “She left and it was like, ‘I guess that’s the end here now, too.’”

Though Pattison takes these events to heart, he also takes them in stride, a necessary quality for hospice volunteers.



“In our world, we use this term existential maturity,” said Lucie Boucher, volunteer coordinator at Hospice Volunteers of Waterville Area. “What it means is someone who is really comfortable with life and the span of life, why you are here and your greater purpose. ... Nick just impresses me as someone who has a whole lot of that kind of maturity.”

Boucher takes care to match volunteers with appropriate clients, but with Pattison she quickly concluded it didn’t matter. “He can make the adjustment no matter who he’s spending time with,” she said. “I know it sounds corny and goofy and all, but he walks in the door and he’s this ray of sunlight.

Everything’s gonna be okay.”

She thought Pattison and Brownie would hit it off, and they did despite the fact that, in addition to their respective ages, they have little

in common on paper. Pattison is a theater and dance major, Jewish studies and environmental studies minor. Brownie operated the boiler at the Hollingsworth & Whitney paper mill, retiring almost 40 years ago. Pattison spent the last two summers working at the Colby student garden. Brownie loved to fish and hunt. Their friendship, though, is about just passing the time, and that’s not a small thing. “He’s a hundred and one years old,” Pattison said. “He somehow knows me and I somehow know him. That’s all we really need to do.”



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—William “Brownie” Brown on his friend Nick Pattison ’18

Nick Pattison ’18 visits William “Brownie” Brown weekly. Refilling the birdfeeder, above, is one of the small things Pattison does for Brownie.