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Message in a Wall

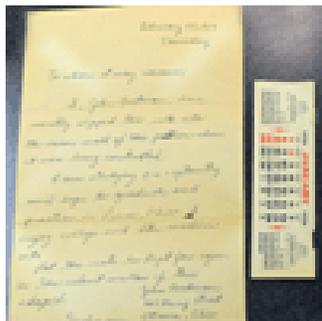
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Message in a Wall

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It didn't surprise John Beckman's siblings when a construction worker stumbled upon an aging, yellowed note their brother scribbled in cursive on Feb. 23, 1956. It was tucked away unobtrusively in a now-brittle envelope behind a wall partition in Founders Hall at the University of Dayton.

"I, John Beckman, have secretly slipped this note into the inner wall of this partition when it was being constructed," wrote the first-year student from Ottawa, Ohio, who was studying pre-optometry. "Let this note be kept for ages in the silent walls of this chapel."

And it was for more than half a century — until Danis Construction started an ambitious, fast-track \$10 million renovation of the 400-bed residence hall in the heart of campus this month.

"He was an ornery guy. He sometimes did the unthinkable," said Midge Lause, 74, of her older brother who was known for his dry sense of humor.

"It sounds like John," added Pete Beckman, 73. "He was his own person. In high school, he'd wear maybe green and blue together."

Both agreed their brother would have gotten a kick out of the find. Beckman, of Toledo, died of Parkinson's disease on Sept. 13, 2010, at the age of 74. He only attended the University of Dayton for a year before briefly attending the seminary.

He was not destined to be either an optometrist, like his grandfather, or a priest. He managed Doebel Flower and Greenhouses for 15 years before opening his own flower shop, Parc Fleurs, in the Franklin Park Mall in Toledo. He and his partner, Erwin Heer, also owned and operated three Crabtree and Evelyn toiletries stores.

None of that popped up in the University's database since Beckman only attended one year. Relatives, friends — and even strangers — filled in the blanks when the University posted a photo of the note on its Facebook page and asked for help locating John Beckman. "No, he's not in trouble," the post said. Nearly 400 people shared the request; dozens more wrote in. Nearly 1,400 people "liked" the photo, outdoing such crowd pleasers as a Xavier men's basketball win, Christmas on Campus and President Barack Obama's First Four visit.

Louis Guzzo's aunt tracked Beckman down through genealogy software. Eileen Richmond, of Belmont, Mass., went a step further and reached out to nephew Stan Beckman, who operates the 126-year-old family-owned Beckman Jewelers in Ottawa, and Beckman's sister, Midge. Richmond even posted a link to Beckman's obit on UD's Facebook page, and residents of the tiny village of Ottawa (population 4,460) printed out the Facebook posting and brought it into the jewelry shop to share with family members.

"This has given a joy to his family. It's like a letter in a bottle. They were very excited to hear the news," Richmond said. "It almost seems, post mortem, John has said hello to his family again."

"This may help people with unexpected turns in their lives take new hope," she said in a telephone interview. "He didn't throw his life away because he couldn't do what he initially wanted to do."

Mark Wallen, a plumber with Wat-Kem Mechanical, discovered the crumbling envelope when he grabbed his saw off the partition. "The letter flipped up and was covered with sawdust," he said. "I took my pocket knife and carefully opened the envelope. I thought it was cool because it was like finding a little time capsule."

What would Beckman think of the discovery?

Niece Rebecca Krouse posted on Facebook, "I know he is smiling in heaven knowing this was found."

His brother Pete thinks differently: "He'd laugh and say, 'I never thought they'd find that.'"

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