

The Gift of SECOND CHANCES

*A Maryland Knight's mental health struggles led
to a lifetime of service inspired by forgiveness and hope*

By Zoey Maraist

“Insanity struck me like a lightning bolt,” Timothy McCarthy recalled of his first nervous breakdown at age 22. “I paced the floor, babbling impossibilities about my present and future. Before the day ended, I had gone stark raving mad.”

This crisis in 1964 marked the beginning of a 13-year odyssey of recurring psychosis, with multiple mental breakdowns and institutionalizations.

On one dark night in 1968, McCarthy found himself driving down a country road, his foot pressed to the gas pedal, hoping something might happen that would end his life. As the speedometer neared 100 miles per hour, telephone poles flew by like matchsticks and steam poured from the hood of his Mustang. Then, unexpectedly, the car gradually rolled to a stop — his radiator had run dry.

Though his life was spared, he continued to struggle with



Photo by Matthew Barick

Opposite page: Timothy McCarthy is pictured outside Beaumont Hall, home of Patapsco (Md.) Council 1960, where he has been an active member for nearly four decades.

Right: McCarthy offers counsel to a teen client in 1988.

mental health challenges for years before finding hope and healing. His suffering ultimately prepared him for a decades-long career helping people overcome addiction.

“Without my faith, I would certainly be dead; of that there can be no doubt,” McCarthy said. “With the help of my counselors, I learned that I could forgive God and forgive myself and that, ultimately, God could use what I’d been through for the good.”

Now 83, McCarthy, a longtime member of Patapsco Council 1960 in Catonsville, Maryland, remains committed to serving God and others — whether praying outside a nearby abortion facility or handing out hot dogs with his fellow Knights at the Catonsville Fourth of July parade.

“It’s in his DNA to serve,” said his wife, Mary Pat McCarthy. “And to help bring people to Christ.”

LOSING HIS MIND, FINDING HIS VOCATION

McCarthy’s desire to serve began in childhood. At age 9, after seeing the film *The Bells of St. Mary’s*, he decided he wanted to be a priest. Following high school, he entered St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore. But by the end of his time there, he could barely speak.

“I began to slip into what was diagnosed as an anxiety neurosis,” he explained. “I could say, ‘Hello’ and ‘Goodbye’ and ‘How are you?’ and then my mind would just go blank. It would just shut down. It was like Mother Nature was trying to tell me, ‘You just weren’t made for this.’”

Over the next 13 years, McCarthy experienced five nervous breakdowns and five institutionalizations. Among other factors contributing to his instability, he felt haunted by the success of his father and high-achieving uncles.

“I couldn’t match it — I just couldn’t, and I just cracked up,” he said.

Ultimately, a counselor helped McCarthy see the power of prayer and forgiveness. The right diagnosis and medication also led to long-term remission.

In the midst of his recovery, McCarthy’s heart turned to the drug-addicted patients who lived alongside him in the mental institutions.

“We shared stories, meals, dreams and tears. We were a brotherhood of sorts,” he recalled. “And I decided right then, when I was still not in very good shape myself, that if I could ever get well, I’d like to help them.”

So McCarthy became a parole agent committed to going above and beyond for the people he worked with.

“Tim was more compassionate with his clients than a lot of the other agents were,” said his friend and former supervisor Diana Harris, noting his willingness to look for housing for them or take them to programs.



Dr. Thomas Cargiulo, then director of the Maryland Bureau of Addiction Services, saw McCarthy’s dedication when he later worked as a detention center addiction counselor. Many inmates are used to being treated as subhuman, Cargiulo noted. But McCarthy didn’t view them that way.

“I was really able to see him at work, with his combination of passion and compassion,” Cargiulo said. “When you have somebody like Tim who treats an inmate like a human being, as an equal — that’s a powerful thing.”

McCarthy’s wife, Mary Pat, whom he married in 2013, also saw his impact firsthand. One morning they were out to breakfast when the waiter started talking to them.

As Mary Pat recalls, he said: “Mr. McCarthy, do you remember me? You helped me a few years ago when I was having trouble with drugs. I’m married; I have a son. I got this job because my life has really been turned around. I just want to say thank you.”

McCarthy’s dedication and faith also made an impression on his coworkers. Getting to know McCarthy inspired Cargiulo to take his own faith more seriously. He now frequently attends daily Mass, prays the rosary and volunteers.

When Harris was injured on the job, resulting in surgery and a yearlong leave from work, McCarthy stepped in.

“Tim gave me his leave so I could feed my family because I was a single mom. So needless to say, I have always and will always owe him a debt of gratitude,” Harris said. “He has always been a passionate, forgiving, loving, kind and just a very great human being.”

A TREATMENT-FIRST APPROACH

In addition to caring for individuals, McCarthy sought to influence the criminal justice system so that it would focus less on punishing offenders and more on ending the addiction that fueled their crimes. The idea was inspired by his own mental health journey.

"In the early going, I would stumble and be institutionalized, but sick leave protected me and I got back to work as an agent," he explained. "However, when my clients exhibited the same out-of-control behaviors that I had, they went to prison. So it occurred to me: Why wouldn't it be possible for them to go to hospitals and not to jails?"

The treatment-first approach is common today but was considered radical at the time, said Harris.

"The powers that be never really focused on the addiction," she observed. "They basically focused on the criminal aspect of it because, you know, we were a public safety organization."

Many thought that addicts in jail would go through detox and become cured, Cargiulo said.

"Now we realize it's a chronic disease, so that's not the case," he explained. "And just locking somebody up can be a lot more traumatic, which then makes recovery that much more challenging."

Though McCarthy believed his approach was effective, his supervisors wanted proof. So they launched the experimental Catonsville High-Risk Drug Project of 1985-86. In the end, the clients in the program had a 94% success rate after one year, McCarthy noted. He shared his findings with his peers in a document called "Unhooking the Hooked Generation," published by the American Probation and Parole Association in 1987.

Since then, the treatment-first approach has become mainstream across the United States, due to McCarthy's efforts and those of others like him.

"Just that piece, if he did nothing else in his life, has helped hundreds of thousands of people to be able to get into treatment and not wind up behind bars," Cargiulo affirmed. "It's a powerful thing."

HEALING THE POOR IN SPIRIT

McCarthy sees his work as a continuation of the work of Blessed Michael McGivney, founder of the Knights of Columbus.

"Father McGivney worked with prisoners himself, with people who were dying. He ministered to the poor," he said. "Essentially, I don't so much minister to the poor as I minister to the poor in spirit — those who don't have the spiritual resources."

In 1988, the example of his own father inspired McCarthy to join the Knights of Columbus. For more than 30 years now, he has served as his council's lecturer, providing succinct, inspiring talks for the men that weave together current events, the lives of the saints and spiritual messages. His brother Knights say he's always at their events — collecting tickets, helping in the kitchen or serving up food. They speak



Timothy McCarthy speaks with Past Grand Knight Michael Duffy during an officers' meeting in March. McCarthy has served as life director of Council 1960 since 2011.

of his devotion to the rosary and his commitment to the pro-life cause.

But the father of three and grandfather of five remains approachable, eager to talk about the faith or the score of the latest Baltimore Ravens game.

"He's not a stuffy guy who, you know, kind of rams religious stuff down," said Michael Doetzer, a member of Council 1960 for more than 50 years. "He's very friendly and very personable."

His brother Knights have also supported his longtime project — a prospective film about addiction and recovery. McCarthy was inspired to write the crime drama after learning about the heroic life of St. Maximilian Kolbe, the patron saint of drug addicts and a Holocaust victim who sacrificed his life for another prisoner.

"When I read his story, I couldn't stop crying," McCarthy recalled. "I said, 'I am going to write a story to touch the heart of the nation, just as you have touched my heart this day.'"

The same tenacity, positivity and faith in God that carried McCarthy through his struggles and his career sustain his hope that the story may one day reach audiences. His dream is that the film's message of forgiveness will help addicts find hope — and perhaps inspire someone to become the priest he wanted to be.

"What I'm about is second chances, because my whole life is a second chance," McCarthy said. "Too often we give up on God, but God never gives up on us." ✚

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