

# Requiem for an Irish mensch

Kevin Leary, the parking mogul who died last week at 80, made a lot of money and gave a lot of it away, seeing in the poor and the homeless his own reflection.

By [Kevin Cullen](#) Globe Columnist, Updated August 19, 2021, 6:46 p.m.



Kevin Leary (right) with his wife, Mary Kelleher, and the late Larry Adams, a homeless man who became a member of the board of Boston Health Care for the Homeless. BOSTON HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS

Dr. Jim O'Connell, who has tended to the homeless for decades, was at the shrine in Lourdes when he met Kevin Leary.

Dr. Tom Durant, one of the great humanitarian doctors in the city, put the arm on O'Connell, insisting he take care of the sick who made the pilgrimage from Boston to France, hoping divine intervention would do what medical intervention could not.

Leary, a rich businessman, tagged along, and, as was his wont, mocked the pompous bishops who swanned around the place like kings.

Then Leary stopped making fun of the self-important and started tending to the most important, the sick and dying who were looking for a miracle.

“He just had this gentle way with people who were sick,” O’Connell said. “He had a gift.”

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It was a gift honed with a humility gained from his own vulnerability. A recovering alcoholic, Kevin Leary yearned to help people, not judge them.

When he looked into the eyes of the homeless, the reflection he saw was his own.

“He didn’t have time for people who thought they were better than someone else,” said Cheryl Kane, a nurse at [Boston Health Care for the Homeless](#), which O’Connell founded.

Leary grew up in Milton. After graduating from Boston College, he served as a Navy lieutenant during the Vietnam War. In 1990, after making money in the investment

business, he saw a booming Boston that would need a lot more parking. He founded VPNE Parking Solutions.

There was something ironic and poignant about Kevin Leary deferring to those with little or nothing, given that he made so much money from people who had the means to valet their cars and eat at fancy restaurants.

But, as his son, Kevin Jr., put it, money was important to him only as a means to help others.

“One of dad’s proudest moments was when he could afford to provide health insurance for his team at VPNE,” Kevin Jr. said.

After he joined the Boston Health Care for the Homeless board, he gravitated to homeless people who sat on the board, like [Larry Adams](#).

“He would call Larry and others, all the time, just to check on them,” O’Connell said. “He would tell them, ‘I got lucky. I’m here. But I could be where you are.’ ”

Leary accompanied O’Connell in the van, all over the city, tending to the homeless.

“He liked visiting the backstretch workers at Suffolk Downs,” O’Connell said. “They were guys from South and Central America. They lived in barns, worked 18 hours a day, paid under the table, would never come to a health clinic.”

After an earthquake devastated Haiti in 2010, Leary quietly approached the two dozen Haitians who worked for VPNE, offering them round-trip air fares to Port-au-Prince so they could spend time with their families. He paid them during their time off.

“We only found out from one of the Haitian guys,” O’Connell said. “Kevin never would have told us.”

Kevin Leary didn’t want flowers bunched around his casket when he died. He wanted people to instead give money to organizations that help the poor and the marginalized:

Boston Health Care for the Homeless, Nativity Prep, Laboure College, Project Place, The Gavin Foundation, The Phoenix, Rodman Ride for Kids, Camp Harborview, Christmas in the City.

He fed the hungry. He housed the homeless. He encouraged those in recovery.

He kept his word to a higher power and never forgot the poor and the misbegotten because, as he used to say, we're all just a couple of bad breaks away from a desperate place.

“He wasn't perfect,” his wife, Mary Kelleher, said. “It was through those flaws and imperfections that he related to people and tried to help them.”

Mary Kelleher joked that he somehow managed to be both vain and humble. And so, on Monday, they buried him in his Gucci loafers with the medallion commemorating his 21st year of sobriety tucked under his green pocket square.

Kevin Leary laughed all the way to Heaven.

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