

Honoring Ken Black, Mr. Lighthouse

Remarks by Timothy Harrison, October 13, 2016, for the USCG Memorial Street Dedication.



Let me begin by saying how humbled and honored I am by having been invited today to make a few brief remarks as we honor the life, the memory, and the legacy of CWO Ken Black, USCG, the man who became known to thousands as Mr. Lighthouse.

But more importantly to me, Ken Black was my dear friend, my mentor, and I often referred to him as my adopted father, and he referred to me as the son that he never had.

I was just a “lighthouse novice” when I first met Ken Black many, many years ago on the front porch of the old Shore Village Museum. I told him that I wanted to write a book on lighthouses, something he later said he often had heard from so many people. He jokingly said years later that he figured that I was just another of the many lighthouse aficionados whom he had met over the years with big dreams, but no follow through.

Over the years, there are lots of people who knew Ken Black, but I doubt that very many of them became as close as we were. In fact, I was the first person to officially and formally give the name, “Mr. Lighthouse” to Ken Black at a gigantic lighthouse event on Cape Cod many years ago. Ken and I spoke daily. We were not just lighthouse acquaintances - we became dear friends. We travelled to many lighthouse events together, my wife, Kathy, and I were at his wedding to Dot, when we declared Dot as “Mrs. Lighthouse.” Ken was there when I received high honors from the Coast Guard. I spoke at the opening of the Ken Black Exhibition Hall, the grand opening of the Maine Lighthouse Museum, and, sadly, but with honor, I gave the eulogy at his funeral.

Ken Black was a man who accomplished so much in his lifetime that at one time a chapter in a book was written just about him. He appeared in countless documentaries, was interviewed hundreds of times by newspaper and television reporters, and he was tickled pink when he was made Grand Marshall of the Rockland Lobster Festival Parade.

CWO Ken Black had a long, illustrious career with the United States Coast Guard, including his service in World War II where he truly was a member of the greatest generation.

But, today, most of us remember Ken Black for his efforts in saving lighthouse artifacts and lighthouse history, a role that started with the very first exhibit at the base of the interior of Boston Lighthouse, which celebrated its 300th Anniversary this year. And that exhibit that is there to this day, all because of Ken. This soon grew to numerous small exhibits at various locations, with the largest eventually being at the Rockland Coast Guard Station that evolved into the Shore Village Museum, which today is the Maine Lighthouse Museum.

But it is also important to remember Ken Black's leadership role in the Coast Guard. Over the years, I have spoken with many retired Coasties who once served under him, and every single one of them had extremely high praise for him.

An example comes from a story I did a while back on one of the memories of Robert Foley, who served under Ken Black at the Point Allerton Search and Rescue Station in Hull, Massachusetts and later as a lighthouse keeper at Plymouth Light. He clearly remembers Ken Black's remarks the first time he met him. "I will teach you leadership and you WILL lead and not follow," words that Robert Foley often heard Black tell other men who were newly assigned to him.

When a local resident near the Plymouth Lighthouse complained that the Coast Guard was using too much oil to run the generator that lighted the candles along the driveway at Christmastime, Ken was forced to tell the keeper to turn off the generator that lighted the candles. But that always bothered him.

In later years, those memories of Plymouth Lighthouse's Christmas problems came back to him, and in his way of getting back, Ken Black was the first person to decorate West Quoddy Head Lighthouse with Christmas lights; later he was the first person to order that Christmas lights be displayed on the Rockland Breakwater Lighthouse.

As Ken Black witnessed the dramatic change in technology, he realized that, during that time of rapidly advancing technology, our nation was in danger of losing forever many of its lighthouse and life-saving artifacts, many which were being discarded in the trash or being deliberately destroyed.

When he retired from the Coast Guard in 1973, he was the official curator of the Coast Guard's First District, a position that he had sought.

But his saving of lighthouse artifacts did not end with his retirement from the Coast Guard. In fact, that's when it began in full swing; he spent the rest of his life searching for lighthouse artifacts that otherwise would surely have been destroyed and lost forever. Those results are evident by walking through the Maine Lighthouse Museum.

Ken had a knack for finding artifacts, and he had a special people skill that made people want to step forward and help him. Many described him as half military and half politician, as over the years hundreds of people came forward to donate or loan more lighthouse artifacts to the collection that was housed for many years in the old Shore Village Museum, here in Rockland. As CWO Black continued his quest for artifacts, the collection outgrew its location and many items were put in storage.

Ken Black's dream of a first class museum on the waterfront became a reality when, in 2005, the Maine Lighthouse Museum opened its doors to house the largest collection in the nation of lighthouses lenses, lamps, and other lighthouse artifacts. This was all because of one man's vision and dream. And Ken Black accomplished this in the days well before the Internet, before cell phones, and before anyone ever heard of something called e-mail.

In fact, Ken Black's Shore Village Museum's lighthouse news-letter reached people all over the world, and it was all done on a typewriter, including the envelopes and licking postage stamps - the old fashioned way. And each and every newsletter ended with the words, "Be Neighborly," as did every letter he sent, something that became his trademark, as well as the way he led his

life, and something that I'd like to see inscribed over the main entrance to the Maine Lighthouse Museum.

The title of his slide presentation that he gave probably close to a thousand times over the years was from a phrase that he himself had coined: "Lighthouses are like people, they come in many different sizes, shapes and colors." He was too classy to add the words "and brightness" to the end of the phrase like some did in later years.

But, let us not forget that behind every great man, there is generally a great wife. Ken found that partner in Dot Black.

Looking back many years ago when I was president of the American Lighthouse Foundation, I remember when we held a public-invited meeting here in Rockland to form a new "Friends of Rockland Breakwater Lighthouse," which would be a chapter of the American Lighthouse Foundation. I asked for nominations from the floor for a president of the new group, and Ken secretly pointed to Dot, who was immediately drafted and elected. And after I left the American Lighthouse Foundation, Dot Black filled my position as the 2nd president in the history of the organization, a position that she held until she was called to serve and devote her time as the volunteer Executive Director of the Maine Lighthouse Museum, which she has faithfully done ever since.

When Ken Black passed away in January of 2007, his passing was mourned by the lighthouse community nationwide. His funeral service, which was locally televised, took place at his beloved Maine Lighthouse Museum, which today is a monument and legacy to his life, one that we must carry on.

However, I am delighted to say that Ken Black knew what kind of legacy he had left, when, before his passing, we hosted a large dinner event here in Rockland that was attended by many friends, relatives, and Coast Guard personnel. That night he received numerous tributes and awards, some which were humorous, but all were very appropriate to his life and career.

It has often been said, "Some people spend their whole lives wondering if they made a difference." Ken Black didn't have that problem. We all know what a personal impact he made on the lives of so many people, something that now continues through the Maine Lighthouse Museum. It is where future generations who will never have met him will be able to see his accomplishments and the amazing collection of lighthouse artifacts that he amassed and they will learn about all the aspects of lighthouse history that helped build our country into a world superpower of the land of the free and the home of the brave.

It has often been said that a person dies twice: once with their last breath, and again when the last time their name is said. In the case of Ken Black, that will never happen. If Ken were here today, he would be proud, but he would also be humble.

In 2005, at the dedication of the Ken Black Exhibition Hall at the Maine Lighthouse Museum, Rear Admiral David P. Pekoske, Commander of the First Coast Guard District, was on hand to honor Ken with a special framed letter from the Commandant of the Coast Guard. However, Admiral Pekoske did admit that the Commandant of the Coast Guard had wanted to honor Ken with a special award, but found that Ken Black had previously, at one time or another, received every award possible from the United States Coast Guard. Well, today, as Ken is here with us in

spirit and watching us from above, we know that he would be chuckling as today "You" have bested one up on the Commandant with this unique honor that Ken Black had not previously been bestowed.

So today this salute is for Ken Black "Mr. Lighthouse" who led his life by the two simple words that he was so well known: "Be Neighborly." And now, as of today, he really is part of the neighborhood.