

A Diminutive Giant

Winner

By S. Colossi

Forward by Bret V

“A Diminutive Giant” is a thoughtful character portrait that commemorates its subject with detail and care. As the title suggests, this story challenges us to look beyond first impressions and consider how surface-level assumptions might obscure another person’s true nature. The friendship depicted in this story is similarly memorable, showing tough love, generosity, mentorship, and warmth. From its descriptive beginning to its moving conclusion, “A Diminutive Giant” stands tall.

Sometimes in life, if we are fortunate, we meet someone who makes us a better person. Through observation, interaction, or instruction, we are able to alter our course, and gain perspective on issues essential to how we conduct our lives, specifically: integrity, honesty, perseverance, and gratitude. That person may impact us so deeply that we may carry part of them along with us for life.

L.J. “Hap” Hoy was just such a person. Hap stood for Happy, a moniker attached to someone who came across initially as the grumpiest, most unhappy person on Earth. Hap was short in stature, at about five-feet six inches, with a somewhat diminutive frame, red hair, and green eyes. He was known, however, to control the room, and command attention when entering, with his long stride, and jaunty, energetic gait. He had a gruff manner, and spoke tersely, as though he had somewhere else he’d rather be; the first, and probably the second time I met him, I didn’t want anything to do with him. As the years passed, I wondered how I ever would have survived in the business world without him and his “Hard Knocks” school of life and commerce.

Hap was a retired Marine Fighter Pilot from the Vietnam Era. He once told me that he enjoyed “Blowing stuff up that belonged to the enemy”, and that he got so good at it, that they took him out of the cockpit, and made him a training officer-- precipitating his retirement. After returning home, Hap went to work for his brother at M.J. Hoy Construction Company doing small general contracting projects: schools, churches, banks, and shopping centers. When brother M.J. passed away, Hap took over,

and his reputation as a hard-nosed, but fair contractor with a reputation for integrity flourished.

In 1985, I started a small concrete contracting firm with shoestring funding and a few good men. Soon after, I had my first interaction with Mr. Hoy. I placed a bid through the local contractor's exchange with Hoy Construction for the site concrete on a small exterminator company expansion. The project was an all-inclusive, lump-sum bid, and I had inadvertently omitted a concrete driveway entrance in my price. After being awarded the contract,

and completing the work, I submitted my invoice to Hoy, adding the \$1,500 cost of the driveway. I promptly received a call from Mr. Hoy, and in his gruff tone was informed, in no uncertain terms, that the entrance wasn't in our contract, and that my mistake wasn't his problem. I would have to “eat” the shortfall, as he didn't have \$1,500 “lying around” to pay for it. I knew that in principle, Hoy was correct, and resolved to be more thorough during the bidding process moving forward. That turned out to be a valuable lesson in the years that followed, when estimating projects in the million dollar range.

Over the next year, my first full year of business, my firm, Atlantic Concrete Contractors, Inc. did multiple projects for Hoy, comprising nearly 80% of our business. Things were going well; I was learning the ins and outs of contracting under the wing of Mr. Hoy. Not long after that first year, contracts with Hoy began to wain noticeably, yet it was apparent that Hoy projects continued to crop around town. I called Hoy's office and asked to speak to him about it, but was told he wasn't available, only to be connected with Jim Craig, his Vice President. Upon inquiry, Jim told me that the reason my work with Hoy was dropping off was because Mr. Hoy had “Kicked me out of the nest” in order to see how I would do on my own for a while. At the time, I was hurt, and too naive to see the big picture; Mr. Hoy was preparing me for the future. I quickly developed an “I'll show him attitude”. Once again, another valuable life lesson was coming my way; Hoy was letting me know to never put all my eggs in one basket, and to never become complacent.

As the months passed without any new contracts from Mr. Hoy, I focused on expanding my client base. Working with contractors using various business models lent perspective as to how I wanted to operate in the future, what types of companies I wanted to do business with, and how to maneuver amongst my peers. We ample work on hand, and were moving in the right direction

Nearly a year later, post Hoy projects, my mobile phone rang one afternoon--Mr. Hoy was on the line. In typical Hoy fashion, with perhaps a little extra brusqueness, he barked, "I have a concrete contractor at First Virginia Bank, on Monticello Avenue, who fell on his ass; I need you to go over there and finish the job." I told him that I would go to his office and pickup some blueprints that afternoon, and quote him a price, to which he responded, "If I had wanted a goddamned price, I'd have asked you for one!", and promptly hung up the phone. I just sat there for a few minutes and smiled, glad to have the old buzzard back in my life.

We finished the job, and many more over the years; I built on what Hap had taught me as years went by--never putting all my eggs in one basket, being thorough in my estimating, always doing what I said I was going to do, and building a reputable company along the way.

Years later, Mr. Hoy called me to his office to speak with me--nothing unusual, as our relationship had taken on a certain ease. When I arrived, things felt differently, however, as Hap was lying on a red leather tufted sofa in his office. He informed me that he had recently been given six months to live, due to cancer. I couldn't hold back the tears--I was devastated. He explained that he looked at me as the son he never had, and that he was proud of what I had become in business, and as a man. I let him know that I appreciated everything he had done for me, and that I would continue to carry his legacy forward with integrity.

I learned many valuable life lessons from Mr. Hoy, and I am grateful for each of them. Perhaps the greatest of all is to never judge a book by its cover, as one never knows how memorable a person we might meet, or the potential giant impact they may have throughout our lives.