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Ex-Golf Caddy Still at Home On the Range 40-Year Employee Is a Club Institution

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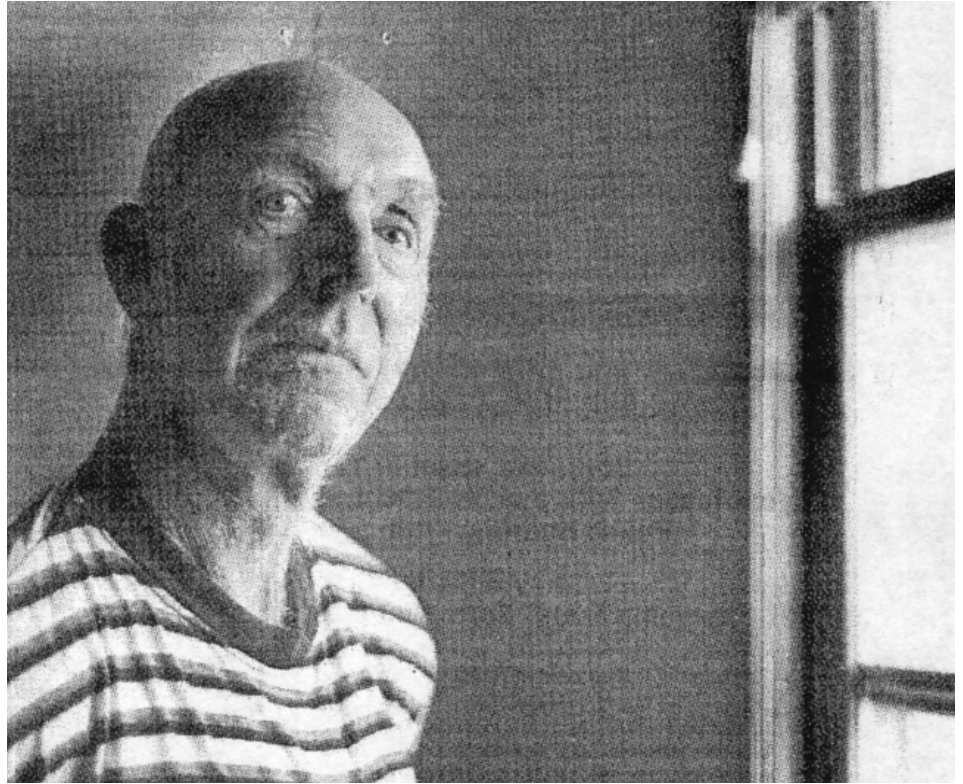
A few short miles from the hubbub of politics, Palm Pilots and IPOs, the meticulously landscaped Washington Golf & Country Club in Arlington dwells in blissful tranquility. From time to time, the silence is gently tapped by a sorrow in song, or the satisfying swoosh of a nicely executed hook shot off in the distance.

For Joseph Matheny, a soft-spoken 67-year-old who has caddied at the club for 40 years, life begins and ends right here, on his beloved golf course.

He is not deliberately indifferent to the bustling world beyond the club. Nor is he out to make a statement.

"I just don't think about it. It doesn't matter," he said.

He is grateful for his simple gifts: Mass every morning, his job picking up balls on the driving range, then home at the end of the day to watch a



Joseph Matheny, 67, has worked at the Washington Golf & Country Club for 40 years. His days as a caddy ended in the mid-1980s. Now Joe gathers balls from the driving range.

little TV, perhaps "The Walton's" or "Bonanza." If he could ask for more, he would love to see "The Lone Ranger" back on the air.

And he is grateful to be alive – and to have lived a productive life. A car accident at age 5 left him with diminished mental capacity and some paralysis along his right side. He said he also sustained nerve damage, so he does not feel pain.

"I was in a coma for four months," he recalled. "Doc said I'd never remember anything. But when I came out of it I told my aunt, 'There's

Ralph,' and sure enough, there was my friend Ralph crossing the street."

For reasons that defy explanation, Joe can recite complicated soliloquies from "Macbeth" and "Julius Caesar." It is unlikely his ability to remember specific Shakespeare passages is connected to the accident since it happened when he was so young.

"I never cared about Shakespeare in school," he said with a shrug. "But one day in 1960 it all just flooded in.

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“The evil that men do lives after them,” he intoned. “The good is oft interred with their bones: So let it be with Caesar.”

Joe was born in Pocahontas County, W.Va. A more fitting place could not be written into a script about Joe Matheny. The Chamber of Commerce there describes a region of rugged whitewater rivers, and mountain steeps along the state’s eastern central boundary, “where shouldered the work of the great logging boom of the early 1900s.”

Pocahontas County is etched into the crags and hollows along Joe’s angular face. His sandy hair has thinned considerably, revealing more of his fair Irish complexion. He stands 6-foot-2 on a lanky frame. His hands are longed and slender and bear evidence of years spent in the sun hefting golf bags.

Joe took up caddying in adolescence. By then he, his mother, older brother and an aunt were living in Morgantown. His father had left while he was still a baby. In 1961, at age 27, Joe moved to Arlington with his mother and aunt. Shortly thereafter, he began caddying at the Washington Golf & Country Club, where he was worked ever since.

After his mother and aunt died in 1978, his only remaining family was his brother in South Carolina – whom he never sees. The golf club became his family. There, he is known as the sweet guy with a good soul.

Joe’s caddying days ended in the mid-1980’s, when he began to slow down and carrying bags wore hard. But caddying was the only work he had ever known. The club, as devoted to Joe as he was to the club, assigned him a new job: gathering balls on the driving range.

Nearly 20 years later, Joe claims sole stewardship of the range, a job to which he is solemnly dedicated. If it were up to him, he would be there all day, seven days a week.

On a gray damp afternoon, the fairways are shrouded in a cold mist; even the most resolute golfers would stay indoors. But the pro shop is open, and its warm light spills out onto the first tee. Inside, Joe stares out the picture window, longing to be out on his range picking up balls.

Joe has remarkable eyes, like clear blue pools. His left eye tends to well up and big tears drop onto his flannel shirt. He isn’t crying – the result if a job – related accident.

Back in 1999, on one of those dazzling October days when the air is sharp but the sun still warms your back, Joe was out accompanying a two-some. He was walking ahead when a player hit a ball that slammed into his face, knocking him to the ground. He remembers the horrified player cried out, “I hit Joe’s eye! I hit Joe’s beautiful blue eye!”

“I remember seeing and hearing the ball, but I didn’t get out of the way in time,” Joe said. “I turned my head and

that’s the last thing I ever knew.”

He speaks matter – of – factly, in a voice barely above a whisper. “The lady who hit me felt terrible. She was doing everything right, and I just didn’t get out of the way. It was just an accident.” He shakes his head.

Joe said he never felt any pain. “I just kept calm; I don’t know why. Like I said, my nerves were destroyed. And I don’t know how to cry.”

Jeff Jankowski, head golf pro at club, has worked there since 1893 and is devoted to the man he affectionately calls “Joe-Joe.”

Jankowski, 43, modestly submits to looking after Joe, but quickly points out that he is but one of many employees and club members who see to it that Joe gets to doctor appointments and takes his medications. Jankowski and his wife, Karin, took Joe in for several weeks after the accident when he needed a lot of care.

Recovered, Joe returned to his beloved practice range. The damage eye atrophied over time, and the lid drooped.

“Joe was prepared to live with the disfigured eye the rest of his life,” Jankowski said. “He didn’t know about artificial eyes.”

Jankowski arranged for Joe to see Michael Hughes, a Vienna ophthalmologist who creates prostheses to correct facial anomalies. Hughes constructed a scleral cover shell no larger than a quarter to fit over

Joe's damaged eye. He hand – painted the shell in painstaking detail to match Joe's other eye, even in embedding tiny red threads beneath the surface to simulate blood vessels.

Hughes remembered Joe as self – effacing and unfailingly polite. "Joe Matheny is a delightful guy," he said. "I fitted the completed shell over his eye and handed him a mirror. His reaction was wonderful. He looked in the mirror and said, 'Cool!'"

"Joe-Joe beamed like a kid," Jankowski recalled. "He was overjoyed."

A devout Catholic, Joe attends Mass every morning before he drives one mile to the road to the club. Because of his vision, he only drives during the day. He never has liked being out at night, because people would take his parking space, he said. Meals on Wheels delivers a hot dinner to his apartment each day. He drives home from the club before noon to accept the meal; otherwise, somebody might take it, he said. Then goes back to work.

Joe manages his own finances and pays his bills. He has some stock and mutual funds. He has health insurance, Social Security and disability benefits, but when he lost his eye, Jankowski and others kicked in with individual donations to make sure his medical expenses were covered.

" 'Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest, for Brutus is an honorable man, so are they all honorable men,'" Joe

said.

The rain seems to be tapering off and the sun is struggling to break through the fog. With any luck, golfers will emerge from the dining room and head for the driving range. Joe is already gathering his coat. Jankowski watches him hurrying out the door, eager to preside over his precious piece of earth.

"There goes Joe-Joe," Jankowski said, smiling, "in charge of the range."