

INQUESTS ARISING FROM THE DEATHS IN THE FORBURY GARDENS TERROR ATTACK OF 20 JUNE 2020

Pen Portrait of Joseph Ritchie-Bennett



January 22, 1981, is the day the world was blessed with Joseph Patrick Ritchie, and our son and brother was born.

Joe was a blessing to the entire world. To know Joe was to love Joe. We have never met anyone who didn't love Joe. His mere presence made you smile. It took very little effort on his part to make you laugh.

We were having a hard time finding the correct words for this tribute to Joe, so we decided to focus on how Joe lived – *not* how he died, as that would do a dishonor to this *great* man, whom we loved every day of his life for 39-years, and whom we are proud to call our son, brother and uncle, but most importantly – our friend.

When you think of Joe, you smile because he was lovable. He was funny – hilarious at times. He was sincere. He listened. He ensured everyone felt included. He

ensured everyone had a voice. He was the definition of the word “ambassador.” His swimming coach from Father Judge High School recounted how on day one, as a young freshman, Joe immediately stood out. Whereas all the other young freshman stood nervously in the corner, Joe was walking around, shaking hands, introducing himself to the seniors, who were three years older than him. Joe continued this tradition into his senior year, where he was the first one to welcome the new freshman swimmers to the team.

Joe was warm. He was genuine. He was welcoming. He loved people. In Joe’s heart, there were no strangers, only friends he had yet to meet. As children growing up together, Joe was always by my side. No matter what I did, he was there. From baseball to soccer, to basketball to Boy Scouts, to simply playing with our friends where we grew up, Joe was by my side. There are four years of difference in age between the two of us, with my brother being younger. To us, it didn’t matter. It was often said by many, how close we were, despite the difference in our ages.

Most of our friends would not even consider playing with someone more than two years younger than them. Not Joe and me. We were always together. As I grew older, I began doing small jobs, such as shoveling snow in the winter and cutting grass in the summer. The little bit of money I made, I spent on Joe and me. We would ride our bikes together down to a pizza shop about eight blocks from where we lived. Joe loved the pizza from there, but more importantly – he loved spending time with me, getting out, having some freedom and just as equally, I loved spending time with him, our lunches together and the great conversations that came with those experiences. What I mostly loved is sharing the bond that only two brothers know.

I believe in my heart, that this is where my brother’s love of travel began. It may have only been a short eight block distance, but Joe loved getting on our bicycles and going. Every time I offered, his face would light up and he always accepted my offer. As we grew older, we grew closer, which is unique because most siblings grow apart as they grow older.

Joe’s love of travel became even more evident during the summer between 8th grade and freshman year of high school. Joe was chosen by the Eisenhower Foundation, due to his outstanding grade point average, his inclusion on the Dean’s list, his excelling in sports – most notably swimming, as well as his service to the community; to attend a trip to New Zealand and Australia. The trip lasted approximately three weeks. In the aftermath of his death, many of the friends that he made during that trip reached out to our family to express their sincerest condolences. That is a testament to our son and brother and the long-lasting impression he made upon people, but to those of us who knew him best, we were not surprised at all – simply put, that is who Joe was. Joe was a “people magnet” – he naturally drew people in and made lifelong friends and a lasting impact on people in the process.

Moving on to high school, Joe attended Father Judge. Joe was a member of the swim team, the National Honor Society, the Spanish Honor Society, the Community Service Corps, Amnesty International, he served on the Ministry Staff, and he also served on

Student Council. He made our family proud every step of the way, made the Dean's list all four years in High School.

Joe attended the International Academy of Design & Technology in Ontario, Canada after high school, earning his college degree in Fashion Marketing and Merchandising on July 5, 2003. As I had mentioned earlier, Joe's tradition of being on the Dean's list for good grades continued throughout his college years and he graduated with High Honors. Joe did not pursue this line of work as his career because, as fate had it, he met the love of his life.

During 2004, Joe went to England to meet a female friend that he attended college with when, by chance, he met Ian Bennett. What began as a friendship quickly turned into love, and in the Spring of 2006, Joe announced to our family that he was moving to England to further his relationship with Ian. Ian was truly Joe's soulmate. He and Joe shared a unification ceremony on November 11, 2006, where Joseph Patrick Ritchie became Joseph Patrick Ritchie-Bennett. Joe and Ian were happily together for six wonderful years before Ian was taken from us way too early, by colon cancer at the young age of 32-years on December 6, 2014.

Between 2006 and 2014, laws in England had changed, and Joe and Ian had applied for a marriage license. They were approved, and in yet another ironic twist of fate, on the very day Ian was buried – December 15, 2014 – Ian and Joe were supposed to be married.

We had last spoken to Joe on Sunday June 14, 2020, 6 short days before he was murdered. During this conversation, we spoke about a myriad of things, but the most important thing we spoke about was making plans to vacation together in the summer of 2023, where we were going to meet him in England for about two days, then we were all going to fly to Greece together and vacation along the Mediterranean Sea. Joe was so excited. We could hear it in his voice. We ended the conversation as we always did – with an “I love you” – and I have thanked the Lord for that every day since 7:00AM on Father's Day, June 21, 2020, when Dad called and woke me up, and told me my brother had been murdered. Little did I know that it was the last time I was going to tell Joe that I love him, and the last time he was going to tell me that he loves me. Mom and Dad ended their conversation with Joe the same way, and just like I, little did they know this would be the last time they heard their son's voice, and the last time they would all tell each other that they love each other.

We will always cherish this last conversation that we had with our son, brother, and uncle; and the memory of how happy he was on the other end of the line. We cannot help to feel as though we have now been cheated out of the benefits of that great relationship for the rest of our lives.

Joe held several jobs since his move to England, but most notably, he worked at ALK-Abello pharmaceuticals at the time of his murder. His colleagues wrote beautiful tributes to him and, like our family and everyone who knew Joe, are devastated in the horrific way he was taken from us.

Our son, brother and uncle lived the life that others only dream of. He truly pursued his passions – life, love, travel, making lasting friendships and impressions, all the while being a great guy.

We found out the horrible news on Sunday June 21, 2020, which happened to be Father's Day. Joe always sent quirky, funny cards. Dad had received his card in the mail a few days in advance but, as always, Dad waits until Father's Day to open his card. We had already had a telephone call scheduled with Joe on that day, so the plan was to open the card and read it, while being on the telephone with Joe. Of course, that never happened, so at some point on Father's Day, Dad brought himself to finally open up the card. In the card, Joe wrote a personal note to Dad. It was very nice and very touching. The very last line of the card that Joe wrote to Dad turned out to be the most prophetic words that I have ever seen written. The last line of the card to Dad said: "I will be thinking of you from afar." We don't think Joe knew how afar he would be away from us when he wrote those words. It is unfair what happened to Joe. He did not deserve to be murdered.

Joe was a comforter, a healer, and the glue that kept our family together, therefore Joe would also want the following: Joe is not only worried about our family, but he would also be worried after James Furlong's family, David Wails' family, as well as their friend Stephen Young and his family. Stephen Young was stabbed along with Joe, but he survived and although Joe did not know them, Joe would also be worried after Patrick Edwards' and his family, as well as Nishit Nisudan and his family. Patrick Edwards and Nishit Nisudan were in a different group and were also stabbed in the same attack, but they survived. Joe would want all of us to pray for them and keep them in our hearts. Please help us in accomplishing that for Joe. Please pray for the Bennett, Furlong, Wails, Young, Edwards and Nisudan families.

Joe was taken from us way too early. Joe was only 39 years old when he was murdered, he was healthy and had a full life ahead of him. Joe was in training at the time of his murder because he intended to climb Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Africa.

Rest in Peace, Joe. This should have never happened to you. We have missed you every day of our lives since June 20, 2020, and we always will. There is a hole in our hearts and a void that will never be filled since you were taken from us. Time has stood still for us. They say people move on. We have not been able to move on without you. It has been too painful.

We are so proud of you and the way that you lived your life. You have touched so many people and left lasting memories. We will forever keep your memory alive. We love you.

Until we see you again, Joe.

Love, Rob, Dad, Mom, Lisa, Robert, Allison, Brendan and Tyler.



Robert Ritchie (Jr), on behalf of the Ritchie family