

A touch of serendipity

Toomey shares 35 years of tales from Grafton Inn

By HOWARD WEISS-TISMAN
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GRAFTON — Bill Toomey is not really interested in figuring out how and why those mysterious strands of magic weave their way through our lives.

After working as assistant innkeeper at the Grafton Inn for 35 years, he has witnessed more than his share of occurrences that defy logic.

Why does a guest who is terminally ill with cancer chose the one night to visit the inn while a childhood friend who he has not seen for decades also checks in?

How can an international visitor happen to be the daughter of one of Toomey's favorite historians, and drop in just as he is engrossed in one of his books?

How can a Windham County native go off to war, travel the world, and then end up in the same small rural town with a job at a country inn that allows him to speak foreign languages, play classical music and help win international awards for the organization he works for?

How, indeed?

"Sometimes the most extraordinary things happen," Toomey said while telling some of his favorite stories at



Zachary P. Stephens/Reformer
Bill Toomey

an event at the inn this week. "It leads you to believe that there is a greater force at work that has brought us together. It makes you wonder how it happens, but it makes perfect sense in the context in which it is revealed."

After 35 years of working more than full time at the Grafton Inn, Toomey, 67, is scaling back a little and moving into semi-retirement.

As part of the inn's 210th anniversary celebration this week, Toomey has been honored with wine tastings, poetry readings, concerts and a night of storytelling as a way to celebrate his three-and-a-half decades of service to the guests of the Grafton Inn.

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Toomey waves to passerby in front of the Grafton Inn.

Weekend Reformer

For a man whose interests range from modern poetry, to 16th century Argentinian music, to body building to fine wine, it was simply impossible to do it all in one night.

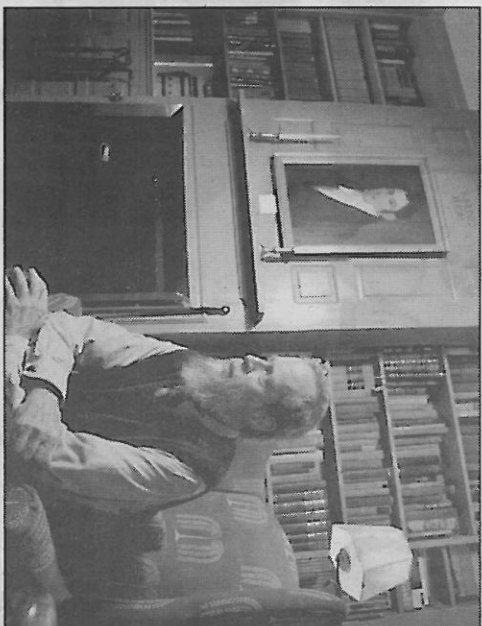
The secret revealed

Toomey was born in Brattleboro, grew up in Bellows Falls, and his family moved to Grafton after he graduated from Bellows Falls High School.

In between international travel, and two years spent in Vietnam during the war, Grafton has largely been his home for about 50 years.

While attending Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire, Toomey was introduced to classical guitar, and the music, and Renaissance instruments, have been a passion ever since.

After attending college, with America embroiled in a war in Vietnam, Toomey applied for, and was granted, Conscientious Objector status. To appease his father, who was unable to serve in World War II due to poor eyesight, Toomey served in Vietnam in a non-combatant role. He worked as a medic, and it was there, while witnessing horrific situations, that he made a choice that would color his life forever. Toomey never wanted to go to Vietnam. He hated the war, but decided to go for his father's



Zachary P. Stephens/Reformer

Assistant Innkeeper Bill Toomey sits in the Kipling Room at the Grafton Inn.

sake. He became depressed, and even contemplated suicide, but in the midst of a brutal war, where he was piecing back together soldiers, he found out that he had a gift for medical work.

In situations where other medics had to turn away, Toomey was able to attend the task at hand, regardless of the blood and brutality.

"As I was there, trapped in my very darkest thoughts, I realized that every one of us is nothing more than a puff in the wind," he said in an interview this week. "At that point, all I could do was be the best medic I could be. No matter job what you have, there is something positive there, and

you might as well find out what that is and do it. Find a way to make it work for you."

He returned from the war with a newfound passion for life. He married his high school sweetheart and they traveled to Switzerland so Toomey could study classical guitar. He studied German, and became fluent, and when he returned to Vermont he helped start the school at the Brattleboro Music Center, which is still going strong after 35 years.

In 1976, while homeschooling his children and teaching music, Toomey was offered a bartending position at the Grafton Inn. Two years later, to get health insur-

ance for his family, Toomey accepted a full-time position as assistant innkeeper, and he has been welcoming guests to Grafton's historic inn ever since.

The world comes to Grafton

Toomey is strong and lithe, he was Vermont's Masters Bodybuilding Champion two consecutive years.

He easily inhabits a space somewhere between down home Yankee practicality and learned European culture.

He can tell you the best way to get a loaded pickup down an icy road, or discuss the role classical instruments play in Argentinian opera.

If you need a toilet plunged, or a poem read, Toomey is your man.

At the Phelps Barn Pub Thursday night, Toomey spent almost two hours telling some of his favorite stories from his 35 years spent at the inn.

He recounted the time a Dutch surgeon was visiting who recognized a scar on another guest's chest as one he left while operating 35 years ago.

He told the tale of the cancer patient, who was trying to make it to the inn but was too ill. Finally he and his hospice worker made it to Grafton, and while coming of the elevator, he ran into childhood friend he had not seen in years. The terminally ill man died two weeks later.

There was the time a traveling musician gave him an album, and

Celebration continues through the weekend

GRAFTON — Celebrations for the Grafton Inn's 210th anniversary, and Bill Toomey's semi-retirement, continue through this weekend.

On Saturday, the Skip D Trio will give a dance concert at 8 p.m.

at the Phelps Barn, featuring cocktails created by Toomey

And on Sunday, there will be an anniversary concert featuring the second performance ever of "Markin' Time," a full-length concert with jazz quintet and poet. The performance was written by Steve Sonntag and Verandah Porche for the 200th birthday of the inn, and the event starts at 3 p.m.

Enjoy an anniversary cake for all attendees to celebrate both the inn and Bill Toomey.

on the cover was the very same 1887 Martin guitar that is now owned by a fellow Grafton resident.

There were stories about two guests, who arrived just after each other, in similar 1965 Corvettes, and ones about serving everyone from Rudolph Serkin to Paul Newman to Billy Joel.

"I am constantly amazed at the great well of relationships between people," he said. "These small moments bring an awareness of the greater forces that we would like to acknowledge. There is something working, which we can't understand, that brings us together."

One of the benefits of the job, which goes back to that battlefield in Vietnam, is that Toomey has been allowed to grow and learn in whatever he did.

Still, on slow evenings, he picks up his lute and plays for the handful of guests who come out for dinner. He has learned about fine wines, and has acted as brother, father and friend for the hundreds of staff members he

has managed through the years. Toomey has no major plans about his semi-retirement. He is going to continue exploring the world of ideas that travel through the country inn in Grafton

"When you are in one place for 35 years you have the benefit of things passing by you that you would otherwise not see if you were moving," said Toomey. "You remain a constant in which to judge the movement of events. Life is short so you may as well make it count."

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