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CITY BEAT

Losing a Friend

by Brendan McGarvey

When you've been buried alive in federal prisons for nearly a quarter century like George Martorano has, you get used to bad news. While serving a life sentence for drug smuggling, he's already lost his mobster father to a gangland hit, his son in a motorcycle accident and his wife to cancer [Cover, "In the Name of His Father," Brendan McGarvey, March 3, 2005].

Last Tuesday, a fellow inmate came to his cell with some more bad news: Chris Penn, the actor who's long supported Martorano, had died at his California home.

Penn, whose Academy Award-winning brother Sean is also known for taking on causes, has stood behind Martorano's feeling that he was being punished because of his bloodlines. "We spoke on the phone almost every Sunday afternoon for 15 years," Martorano said on the phone from a central Florida prison. "It's hard to lose him."

Penn—best known for playing Nice Guy Eddie in *Reservoir Dogs*—was talking about producing a screenplay Martorano had written while incarcerated.

"He's the longest-serving nonviolent offender ever. It's ridiculous," Penn said during a September interview with *City Paper*. "He should be out here, not in there. I can't wait until the day he is free."

Having made numerous prison visits, the actor often stayed with the Martoranos when he was in Philadelphia. Martorano recalls that the Saloon was his favorite local restaurant, and also says that Penn would personally stand in line at the Writer's Guild Association in L.A. to renew expired copyrights on Martorano's novels, short stories, poems and screenplays.

"He grew up around movie stars ... but he was not impressed by fame," Martorano says. "He was about family relationships and good friends. Real friendship."

With a cause of death still pending, and investigators ruling out foul play, speculation has centered around Penn's battles with drugs and alcohol.

"We all have vulnerabilities," says Martorano. "Chris had joined AA and had gotten his life straightened out."

A day after hearing the news, Martorano said he spoke to Penn's brothers, Sean and Michael. During the call, he dictated a poem he had written called "Chris's Voice."

"I told them to read my poem to Chris when you think it's appropriate," he says.



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