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Helping a stranger

'A bond that nothing will take away'



Michael Bean / Daily Sun

Tom and Jan Hennessy pose at their home in The Villages. Paul Ciceri's only link to the outside world was Tom when he was imprisoned in United Arab Emirates.

CICERI'S 'ANGEL'

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Villages resident Tom Hennessy was Paul Ciceri's only link to the outside world and helped him survive foreign imprisonment

By **CURT HILLS**
SENIOR WRITER

THE VILLAGES — here's an "angel" living in The Villages, according to one man from the Florida Keys.

When Villages resident Tom Hennessy was living and working in the United Arab Emirates, he badgered U.S. Embassy officials to do more than what they had, stood for hours in the baking sun just to visit a prisoner for a measly 10 minutes, and served as messenger between a stranger and the stranger's family.

The stranger was Paul Ciceri, a man imprisoned for allegedly using, importing, and trafficking cocaine with intent to distribute. Ciceri spent nearly four years in prison for what he called a

'When Tom came to visit me, it was on his day off. That was something he didn't have to do. He suffered in that heat for (a visit of) five minutes.'

"setup." Besides U.S. Embassy officials, his only link to the outside world of humanity was Hennessy.

When Independence Day rang out in 2002, Hennessy was there to greet Ciceri as he was finally released. Despite his suffering, the ordeal produced a positive — an everlasting

friendship between the two men.

"It's a bond we have that nothing will ever take away," Ciceri said.

To create that bond put one man's human spirit to the test and the other's resolve not to walk away from another of God's children in distress.

A so-called friend

Ciceri went to the Middle East to teach English as a second language. His efforts to recruit students and teach them was successful enough to land him a promotion.

With life seemingly going well, Ciceri took a vacation with a friend from Malaysia, whom he had met in a travel club. The two spent time in Athens, Greece, "partying," and Ciceri admittedly trying some cocaine that

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his friend produced, he said.

But their vacation came on the heels of U.S. Embassy bombings in the region, followed by President Bill Clinton ordering troops to bomb a pharmaceutical plant in retaliation, saying it was being used to produce items for terrorists. Ciceri noticed a big change in his friend.

"This person had changed in his attitudes toward Americans," he said.

His friend continued to "pick on" Ciceri and continued to display anti-American sentiment.

"We had a pretty good argument about it," Ciceri recalled. "It destroyed our friendship."

Upon his return to Abu Dhabi, Ciceri had just retrieved his three pieces of baggage, including a black bag and green backpack. He said it didn't take long for security to approach him to ask him where he had just arrived from.

"Ah yes," was the reply when he said "Athens."

"I want to see your black bag," Ciceri recalled the security officer saying.

Ciceri tried to comply, by offering the black bag.

"No, it's not that one," Ciceri remembered the officer saying. "At that moment, I knew something was wrong. He pointed to my green backpack."

Inside the backpack was Ciceri's shaving kit bag — a small black bag, which Ciceri thought contained items like his shaving cream, razor and

toothbrush. The officer took the bag from Ciceri's hands, reaching inside, pulling a flap back and retrieving a vial that contained the cocaine the two so-called friends had used earlier.

"I realized I'd been set up and I was in trouble," Ciceri said.

A life derailed

Ciceri claimed he was strip searched and interrogated for three hours, although few spoke English. He asked, then later screamed, for contact with an attorney or the U.S. Embassy, claiming his rights had been violated. The reply from one of his captors was chilling, he said.

"His comment was, 'You've got no rights here,'" Ciceri said.

Days passed with Ciceri's professing his innocence while he was confined to a dingy cell with others, forced to use their hands to dip into a common food tray.

"It was quite disgusting," Ciceri said.

Days after his arrest, Ciceri was granted a single telephone call — in exchange for a statement. He said he ended up signing his name to a statement written in Arabic.

"I don't know to this day what the statement said," he said.

The United Arab Emirates legal system paraded him in front of a public prosecutor. With an apparent signed confession, they sentenced him on charges of using, importing, trafficking, and intending to distribute cocaine.

His lone telephone call went to his boss, but was terminated almost as soon as it

started, with two men dragging Ciceri away from the phone. He was tossed in a van, which headed out into the desert.

"I thought this is where they take me out and shoot me," he recalled.

But then the sign "Al Wathba Prison" came into view.

Stuck in prison

U.S. Embassy officials had been looking for Ciceri since his family and company reported him missing. They'd found his car at the airport, but police denied knowing his whereabouts initially. His brief telephone call to his boss finally put Embassy officials on the right track, but it took them days before they were allowed to see Ciceri.

Embassy officials told Ciceri there was little they could do initially, since he'd signed the statement. Although he had been sentenced to prison, it would take several more months before his verdict came in — meaning an appeal couldn't start until then. Embassy officials made that appeal and Ciceri claimed they told him the United Arab Emirates government rarely said "no" to appeals involving Americans. But this was one of those rarities.

"I could tell it was frustrating for them," Ciceri said of the Embassy staff.

It was a place with bare walls and bare floors. Ciceri said he went two years without seeing the sun.

Other than mail from his family that was weeks old and an occasional appearance by Embassy officials, Ciceri had no visitors. Then one day a

guard asked him if wanted to see someone named Tom from the church. Even though he had no clue who that was, he agreed to the visit.

The visitor was Hennessy, who had been told by some British friends that there was a fellow American in prison who didn't have any visitors. With his wife Jan's blessing, Hennessy decided he would go visit the man.

"It was an ordeal getting in there," Hennessy said.

He contacted Embassy officials and made six trips before finally being allowed visitation. To get in, he had to stand outside for as long as two hours, with the sun beating down on him — all for visits that lasted only five to 10 minutes.

"It was a small horseshoe-shaped room with little windows and no privacy at all," Hennessy recalled.

At first, they spoke through a wire mesh fence, but after a few visits, it was replaced by plexiglass, with no holes to hear through.

"Everybody around us was yelling," Ciceri said. "We couldn't hear what each other was saying."

At times, Hennessy resigned himself to holding up pieces of paper against the plexiglass that contained e-mail messages to Ciceri and sports scores of teams back home.

"I tried to come with a list," Hennessy said of topics.

Let freedom ring

"When Tom came to visit me, it was on his day off," Ciceri said. "That was something he didn't have to do. He suffered in that heat for (a visit of) five minutes."

Hennessy never questioned

Ciceri's guilt or innocence when he decided to go visit. And for a year, he continued to make visits, every other weekend.

"It was the right thing to do," Hennessy said of his visits.

After his release, Ciceri said he once asked Hennessy why he reached out to a stranger.

"I asked Tom 'why did you give up all those days off?'"

Ciceri said. "It was the Christian thing to do," he said."

After 33 months, Ciceri was released from prison — on July, 4, 2002 — Independence Day. Hennessy agreed to meet him at the airport before he was deported and sent back to the United States.

"All I could do is go over to Tom and put my arms around him and thank him for what he had done," Ciceri said. "It was Tom I gave my first hug to."

Embassy officials and guards

escorting Ciceri could only stand back and watch.

"It was a very emotional moment," Ciceri said.

"It sure was," Hennessy replied.

Now Ciceri calls Key West home and when Hennessy left United Arab Emirates two years ago, he and his wife moved to The Villages.

Ciceri recently completed a book about his ordeal and is working on finding an editor and publisher. And of course, Hennessy is featured in the book.

"This is about Tom's story — about doing something he didn't have to," Ciceri.

And when his book is published, Ciceri knows where the first copy is headed.

"Tom will get the first one, it will be autographed to my best friend."

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