



KENNETH JOHN BISSETT

December 19, 1967 – December 21, 1988

Hartsdale, New York

Cornell University

Communications Major

By age 11, Kenneth Bissett had created a comic book series that rivaled anything Marvel was putting out at the time. Ken wrote a letter to the company saying just that.

In it, the fifth-grade student criticized Marvel's narrow depiction of superheroes.

"Why are robots always the bad guys?" Ken asked. In Ken's comic books, robots were complex individuals who knew right from wrong.

Ken included an in-depth description of his main robot creations: Utonic Man, the "Ultra Strongman," with "a voice like a cyclone, [who] could change his matter through a proton converter," and "Phason, the underdog."

The 11-year-old gave his heroes fully developed emotions.

"Many say, 'Robots don't have feelings, so they are tyrannic[al],'" Ken wrote in his letter. "Well, I say phooey. Utonic man has a programmed circuit for feelings."

Ken was the focal point of his family. He was an only child, raised by his parents, John and Florence Bissett and his uncle John Anselmo, in their Hartsdale, N.Y., apartment.

After Ken's death, the Bissetts asked Anselmo, who was also Ken's godfather, to write a short biography about their son. It included a record of Ken's accomplishments.

Ken excelled in academics and achieved the highest SAT scores for his class at Iona Preparatory School in Hartsdale his senior year of high school. He was a National Merit Finalist, and he secured scholarships to both Dartmouth College and Cornell University. He selected Cornell.

Ken knew how to have a good time, too. In the biography, Anselmo recalls how Florence Bissett called Ken's gang of buddies at Iona Prep the "Night Riders," after the time they left Westchester at 11 p.m. on the train for New York City. The boys had heard that after hours was the best time to hear good jazz in the city on a Saturday night. Ken's love for jazz continued to blossom throughout his college career.

Dave Didato, one of Ken's prep school friends and fellow "Night Rider," recalled those adventures in a memorial letter addressed to Ken.

"I remember the times we used to head down to Greenwich Village," Didato

wrote. "We always loved to hear the jazz greats play at the Blue Note or the Vanguard."

Didato also recalled the times he spent making music in his basement with Ken, and listening to the stories he wrote.

"I was impressed with how the world abounded with humor and irony for you," Didato recalled. "I couldn't begin to count how many laughs have come from my mouth because of you, and that will always be my most treasured memory."

At Cornell, Ken enrolled in the College of Engineering but soon realized the program was not right for him. He began writing articles for the Cornell Countryman, his college magazine, and soon decided on a career in communications. After transferring programs, Ken opted to study in London through Syracuse University. While abroad, Ken visited Scotland, France, Holland, Italy and the Soviet Union. He relayed his experiences in these places to his favorite professor at Cornell.

In a letter to this professor, Ken described his experience in the country, which was then communist, as "profound."

"Russia..." Ken wrote. "I think every American, every Western European, anyone who's unhappy with their country, should visit Moscow so they can appreciate their freedom and their way of life."

On July 3, 1988, Ken's family sat around the dinner table watching news reports that the U.S. Navy had destroyed an Iranian airbus.

"We are going to pay for this," Ken remarked to his parents and uncle.

Fewer than six months later, Ken boarded Pan Am Flight 103. Ken's mother waited eagerly at home with a birthday cake she had baked that morning. Ken had turned 21 while in Europe, and Florence Bissett had planned a day of festivities upon the safe return of her only son.

Ken planned to someday return the favor to his parents for all the love and devotion they gave him.

"In the future I would like to take good care of my parents as they have taken care of me," Ken wrote at age 11 in a school essay. "Also, when I am settled I would like to adopt a child so it could be as happy as I am today."

- CLAIRE DUFFETT