Russ Pelletier and 6-time Falmouth winner Joan Samuelson with Tommy during Falmouth Road Race Weekend in 2017.

1984 Olympic gold medalist Joan Samuelson sent this great photo with the salutation, “Cheers to Tommy. Long may he run with us. His cheers will resonate for miles and stories to come. He always went the extra miles for our sport and the runners he so loved and encouraged.”

“Well, we all know that he is already organizing the first Heaven 10K. The folks up there have no idea what they are inheriting.

“He passed away last night. Just want to let you know that he never lost his sense of humor. I was with him yesterday afternoon. It was obvious that he was at the end of the line.

“Around the bed were three women on the JML staff and myself. He was having difficulty breathing and couldn’t speak. But we knew he could hear us.

“So I told him ‘Tommy, no matter what the situation, you always have young ladies taking care of you.’ I couldn’t hear his reply, but the nurse closest to him did. I asked, ‘What did he say?’ She looked at me and said, ‘I have the best seat in the house.’

“He went out on his own terms.”
Toni Reavis:

In the end, Tommy bore witness to the Christian truth so many of us were raised on, that it is infinitely more rewarding to give than to receive. Whether behind the bar at the Eliot Lounge in Boston, the Brothers Four or the Quarterdeck in Falmouth, Tommy was forever searching for ways to bring people together and creating a sense of community.

The words I remember most from TL while interviewing him after one honor after another had been bestowed upon him were, "Toni, there are so many more deserving people than me."

Yeah, well, Tommy, I don’t think so. Frank Shorter, the man whose Olympic Marathon gold medal in Munich 1972 inspired Tommy to found the Falmouth Road Race, always had an unerring eye in gauging guile and deceit. Fame has a way of fitting that lens, I suspect. But Frank knew from the moment he met TL that this was a heart that was open, honest, and true. No wonder Frank kept coming to Falmouth year after year. He, like the rest of us, needed his annual dose of Tommy to offset the growing cynicism that had built up in the time between TL visits.

Love you always, Tommy. There have been none like ya before, and none likely to follow. Thanks for the memories and so much more.

— (Long before becoming a TV analyst and ESPN commentator—but while a regular at the Eliot—Toni produced an early morning “Runner’s Digest” radio show at tiny WNTN in Newton, MA.)

Anne Prior:

“Thank you Tommy, for making people happy!” At the end of the Falmouth Road Race course there sits a bench with this enigmatic inscription. Who is this Tommy and how did he make people happy?

We first met Tommy about 22 years ago when he came to Falmouth to work at the Quarterdeck Restaurant. At age 67 he moved into a “bungalow” behind investment property we owned—the first time ever TL had a home of his own, especially with a backyard for watching the flowers grow and the chickadees sing. Tommy quickly became part of our family—a special extra grandparent to our family. We were blessed!

I’d eat at the QD with him and he’d talk to a couple who’d I’d tell him were obviously on “date night” and before you knew it they were entranced by Tommy, as was everyone! He was such a special person. We were privileged to go on the “last run” with him last Thursday when he reached the finish line one more time! We loved him and he loved us (among thousands!). What more could we ask?

The local hardware store last week posted on their outdoor board “Remembering Tommy Leonard!” Tommy would have liked that too. In fact, he’d have us out buying the birdseed! We miss you Tommy and we love you. And we’ll remember you when we sit on your bench or hear the chickadees in Falmouth—your quaint little village-by-the-sea!

— (Beyond being loving friends, Falmouth’s Anne and Richard Prior provided Tommy “The Bungalow,” a beloved abode during his later years.)

Brent “Hawk” Hawkins:

It was Friday afternoon of the Boston Marathon in 1978 when I first walked into the famed Eliot Lounge. In the dim light I made my way to the bar. Only a few patrons were in the place. I see the bartender with the face of the map of Ireland.

“Hi! What’s your name?”

“I’m Tommy Leonard,” came the reply.

“Where are you from?”

“Uniontown, Pennsylvania.”

“Are you in town for the marathon?”

“Yes.”

“Did you run in college?”

“Yes, I ran for West Virginia University.”

“You think you’ll come back to run Boston next year?”

“I hope so,” I said.

“Well then, come back to the Eliot, I’ll remember you!”

So I’m thinking this is just some bartender banter for the masses that are coming through for the marathon. We said our good-byes, I ran a modest race on Monday, 2:32 something and went home.

Flash forward a year to the same Friday of Marathon weekend. I walked back into the Eliot Lounge. Tommy was bartending. He sees me approaching; his arms reaching higher in the sky and his voice getting louder as he spoke, “Brent Hawkins. Uniontown, Pennsylvania. West Virginia University. Great to see you! When did you get to town?”

Wow! Goose bumps arose. I thought, “Who is this guy? Does he work for the CIA?”

Well, that was just Tommy being Tommy. And that’s how we launched a 40-year friend-
My 50-year friendship with Tommy is over...my Irish heart saddened by his passing, but for everyone who knew the man, we’ll share a thousand great memories forever.

— (“The real life inspiration for the “Cheers” character Sam Malone, Eddie was behind umpteen charitable enterprises during his 35 years at the Bull & Finch. Tommy often said, “I’m just following Eddie’s lead” and Boston Mayor Ray Flynn commented, “He’s as important as George Washington to this city; he’s that well known.”)

Bill Rodgers:

From my small apartment in Jamaica Plain I could run to the Boston College track, where we GBTC athletes trained. In 1974 we bumped into a fellow running around the BC Reservoir; he said his name was Tommy Leonard, he’d run the Boston Marathon and was a bartender at the Eliot Lounge in Boston.

At this time a shocking thing was happening—lots of people were running all of a sudden! We could feel “something was happening,” as Mr. Dylan wrote. Tommy Leonard left it too. He told me I should open a running retail store as a resource for runners near Boston College as so many students were running. I ended up doing this in 1977. But before that, in ’74, Tommy invited me to GBTC athletes to his new race: the Falmouth Road Race. As Tommy laid it out, women in bikinis would be giving out water as we ran, the race was a fundraiser for the Falmouth HS Girls Track team, and an Olympian, Marty Liquori was racing! We signed up en masse...

We didn’t have shoe contracts, EPO, “Special Racing Shoes”, prize and appearance money, clocks with mile splits along the course, groupies, or many fans; but, we all knew what we were doing, and we had Tommy Leonard—the always laughing, smiling Irishman, who got along with everybody—and boy did he pick a course in Falmouth!

Like any real runner, Tommy loved Nature; he grew up out in the country in Westfield, Mass.

As he ran long the Atlantic Ocean in Falmouth, with the seagulls crying above the beaches and the boats, Tommy dreamed up his 7-mile Captain Kidd to the Brothers 4 Road Race.

When I line up every August in Falmouth I think of Tommy Leonard and what he stood for...

— (A four-time Boston & NYC Marathon winner, Boston Billy also snagged three Falmouth titles.)

Frank Shorter:

Tommy Leonard was a totally believable person who led an incredibly unbelievable life. I met him 44 years ago and immediately sensed he had no hidden agendas.

I think this is a big part of why I and so many others agreed to help him over the years in any way we could. Saying “sure” was a reflex because we knew it would always be fun and along the way so many people would benefit.

I also came to realize he had an absolutely heartfelt ability to downplay and minimize the enormous credit he always deserved.

For 44 years this man remained genuine in my eyes, and in the eyes of so many others who now miss him dearly.

Good bye Tommy...

God Speed!

— (The 1972 Olympic Marathon gold medalist, Shorter twice won Falmouth in its early days.)

Gloria Ratti:

I’m not sure if Tommy liked me because my husband Charlie was a Marine or because I was a volunteer.

Whether it was Litchfield or Falmouth, whatever Tommy Leonard touched turned to gold. The mere mention of his name brought runners out in droves—some to run, others just to meet him.

One would think that someone like Tommy would be larger than life but he wasn’t. I
Guy Morse:

My relationship with Tommy began in early 1986, when then-Boston Mayor Ray Flynn hosted a reception at the old Exchange Restaurant. I’d just been hired by the BAA with the hope of restoring order and success to the marathon. Following several years of doubt and controversy, it was an important time to look ahead and to a new beginning for Boston. Many from the local running community and the Boston sports press were there, many I’d be meeting for the first time.

Naturally, Tommy was there to endorse any activity that helped support the BAA and its marathon.

I distinctly remember what he said to me by way of introduction. Grasping my hand, he smiled, laughed and said, “Good luck Guy, boy are you going to need it!”

With those first surprising yet honest words, we became fast friends, and we enjoyed a wonderful, and honest, friendship that lasted more than three decades.

Fast forward and my last conversation with Tommy was in October, when we shared a pint at the Quarterdeck on the occasion of the Cape Cod Marathon, reminiscing about all the history we shared and how lucky we were to be a part of this amazing community.

I was anxious to share with him my hope to join with developer Tim O’Connell and help support “Tommy’s Place,” the new free-of-charge respite home being created in Falmouth for kids suffering from cancer and their families.

Tommy, of course, had already given his blessing and approval to name the facility in his honor, and was excited about the venture. In true TL fashion, he wished he could do more, to donate more to the cause, but I assured him all we needed was his continued blessing and the commitment to show up for the ribbon-cutting.

While that sadly is impossible now, I have doubled-down on my commitment to help make “Tommy’s Place” a living monument to the legacy of Tommy Leonard, his big heart and boundless compassion, especially for kids. I think Tommy would be humbled, and pleased.

— (Guy Morse brought the Boston Marathon into the prize-money era, serving as its race director from 1985 to 2000 and Executive Director for the ensuing decade. He currently sits on the B.A.A. Board of Governors.)

Kathleen Cleary:

“Life without dreams would be intolerable” is one of my favorite TL quotes. A true visionary who not only saw the possibilities but doggedly pursued many of his dreams—which always had the intent of helping someone—to make them come true.

When the Eliot closed, Tommy lived with us in the Berkshires while figuring out where in the world he’d bring his colorful personality next.

He worked for us as a bartender at our restaurant, the Cork ‘n Hearth in Lee, MA. In true TL form, he demonstrated his horrible bartending skills—messing up orders, delivering dessert before the salad, giving $20 change for a $10 bill while enduring every single customer who came in with his charm and storytelling. We loved it!

While living with us, Tommy began to share some of the horrific details of his childhood. At this stage, we’d known him close to 20 years as the optimistic guy who touched so many lives and helped so many folks...with a bridge in Boston and a bench in Falmouth named after him and Proclamations up the Ya-zoo from multiple Governors and Mayors plus the Mass. Senate. He orchestrated many shenanigans that brought complete joy to so many! Frankly, it was a total disconnect for me—How can someone who endured his childhood end up with such a positive and child-like innocent outlook on life? It was a story that needed to be told. It was my great honor to put that story together.

I interviewed 80+ people while doing research for the book, and in some way, every single person said in essence, “He’s the most positive person I know!”

You’re in the arms of the angels, Tommy,
Tommy Leonard

(Continued)

and no doubt saying “Let the race begin and the dance to follow!”

— (Kathleen Cleary and her husband Michael knew Tommy from back in the ‘70s when they were both running the Boston Marathon, and both became devotees of the Eliot and the man tending its bar. Kathleen published her book on Tommy in 2005 and it’s available at amazon.com and BN.com.)

David Jarvis:

Tommy Leonard had a gift. Tommy was a gift. He was an idea’s man and a leader. The Falmouth Road Race wasn’t a business plan to make a buck, but an idea to bring people together, have a nice run in the morning and get together with the family and friends later in the day and into the night. A lot of people believed in Tommy’s vision and the race day benefits extend to hotels, B+B’s, restaurants, shops, beaches and boating, ranking it right up there with Memorial Day, the 4th of July, and Labor Day. A very nice gift from Tommy.

The Falmouth Walk, founded with former bartender Eddie Doyle; same thing on a smaller scale. So many charities and local groups and high school sports teams benefited from these two events. Tommy was way ahead in giving back before it became fashionable. He was all about helping others and not himself.

There was also the Marine’s Birthday party. Held at the Quarterdeck, it started with 30 marines downstairs and grew to 90, moved upstairs and was closed to the public for lunch. Tommy had a beautiful cake made... half a dozen of us there at 8:00 am setting up, servers and greeters. The police would stop traffic on Main St. so the marines could get their picture taken by the local paper. It was a full day with an emcee, prayer for vocation, high ranking officers, and a guest speaker. It ended with the youngest and oldest marine cutting the cake. Tommy made sure every marine walked out with a gift bag; he wanted it to be a special day for everyone.

Tommy was kind, generous, happy go lucky, a lover of music, a gentleman’s gentleman who had the ability to uplift people, make them feel good with just a simple hello or good morning. He was like a fishing lure, lucky, a lover of music, a gentleman’s gentleman. It occurred to me that Tommy was the happiest man tending its bar. Tommy was way ahead in giving back before it became fashionable. He was an idea’s man and a leader. The many new friendships, the places we traveled, laughs and, oh the stories, will last a lifetime. I learned so much from this humble, kind hearted and caring person. It occurred to me that Tommy was the happiest when he was helping others, all with that wonderful smile.

Tommy, it’s been a great ride and thanks for letting me tag along. When you’re up there reading this edition of New England Runner, I hope you know how many lives you touched and the many people that love you. I will see you down the road and we will have a couple of pints and share some stories with J.T.

I love you buddy!

— (Western Mass. staple Billy Harbilas is the world’s foremost Tommy Leonard impersonator.)

NR

Bobby Hodge:

Boston sportswriter and friend Joe Con-cannon called him the “Guru” and he drew people into his light as a friend of long distance running, Athletics, and as a lover of the Boston Marathon, serving as its official greeter.

I first met Tommy in February 1975 at the Amherst 10-miler. I drove out there from Boston in my Buick Skylark, replete with a passenger door that didn’t open and I still remember GBTC teammates Billy Rodgers, his girlfriend Ellen and Vinny Fleming climbing through the window to get in and out of the car.

This was prior to Billy ever having won Boston, or finishing third at the World Cross Country Championships, both of which happened only weeks later. Vinny had been telling me about the Eliot and Tommy, but I still had never been. It was beginning to become a clubhouse for the Greater Boston Track Club, basically because of Tommy and his love for running, runners and the Boston Marathon.

After the race in Amherst we went to a local pub and I met Tommy who, when I told him I was from Lowell fired back, “Jack Kerouac!” Yes Tommy, I am aware. He told me I had to run Falmouth and I had to come to the Eliot on marathon day.

The Falmouth race—Tommy’s baby then—was what brought me back to running after a brief hiatus. I had read about the 1974 Falmouth race with Will Rodgers beating Marty Liquori and the rest of the top 10 mainly GBTC runners.

This was definitely the beginning of something special and Billy and Tommy were the catalysts... but that day in Amherst I just felt motivated to become a better athlete. I had no idea that both Boston and the Eliot were about to become a Mecca and Tommy it’s leading light.

I am happy to have had Tommy as a friend and confidant for all these years. Be a good boy, Tommy.

— (A 7-time Mt. Washington winner with a marathon best of 2:10:59, Hodgie placed 3rd at the 1979 Boston Marathon in 2:12:30. The following year he placed 4th at Falmouth in the best of his six outings there.)

Billy Harbilas:

The year was 1980 and I had just finished the New York City Marathon. I was standing in Central Park with thousands of other runners and their families. I noticed a fellow walking toward me with a six pack in his hand. It was Tommy Leonard. I had met him a couple years earlier but I didn’t really know him. He asked me to meet him later that night at a bar and, being the flexible person I am, I said yes. We met at a great bar and after exchanging pleasantries, a serious look came over his face. He said, Billy, I need a favor, I said sure...Billy I need you to take care of my baby. I paused...Tommy, you have children? He said, no you cracker head, my newest race—the talking turkey cross country run. It was then that I became race director and that’s where our little journey began. For the next 35 years he would come to our house on Thanksgiving for the race and again for the Holyoke St. Patrick’s Day road race, another one of his creations.

Tommy changed my life the day he walked into it. The many new friendships, the places we traveled, laughs and, oh the stories, will last a lifetime. I learned so much from this humble, kind hearted and caring person. It occurred to me that Tommy was the happiest when he was helping others, all with that wonderful smile.

Tommy, it’s been a great ride and thanks for letting me tag along. When you’re up there reading this edition of New England Runner, I hope you know how many lives you touched and the many people that love you. I will see you down the road and we will have a couple of pints and share some stories with J.T.

I love you buddy!

— (Western Mass. staple Billy Harbilas is the world’s foremost Tommy Leonard impersonator.)

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Tommy and Bob Hodge in Liam Maguire’s Irish Pub on Falmouth’s Main St. in 2015 following NER Pub Series stop No. 3—the Liam Maguire’s Irish Pub Almost 5-Miler tri-directed by Courtney Bird, Jack Carroll and Russ Pelletier.

Photo by FitzFoto/NERunner

Tommy front and center before the start of the 2005 Holyoke St. Patrick’s Day 10K.

Photo by FitzFoto/NERunner