

Tribute for Frank Edward Henry

Thank you all for coming here today. For some of you, it has been a long and difficult journey. My sisters and I are very grateful for your presence, for the moments that you are sharing with us to honor our dad.

We may not know all of your names, but we do know that if you are here, my dad respected and loved you. You were all a very special part of his life.

We have come here today to honor the life and the person of Frank Edward Henry. This is a painful time for my sisters and myself, for we have lost our one true hero. From that moment when each of us first opened our eyes in this world and looked into the face of our dad, we saw a gentle man whom we would admire and try to emulate for the rest of our lives. In his eyes we saw his loving spirit, wrapped in his arms we felt his strength, in his voice we heard acceptance and we knew that we would always be protected by him. Now his spirit is gone from our eyes and our ears, but our dad will never, ever be gone from our memories.

Ever since our dad faced the first surgery a couple of years ago for a brain tumor, my sisters and I have been reflecting on the life which dad lived. It was as if an angel had come to each of us in our sleep to remind us that the time was coming when God would take dad "home". We have all worked very hard these last few years to delay that day, to make sure that our dad would be on earth even longer than his 85 years. In the meantime, each of us, separately and together, have been thinking about dad's life, trying to find the words that would describe our dad, that would show to us and to the world the value of the life which our dad has lived.

Most of us here today are aware of the facts of our dad's life — where he was born, his family's history as immigrants from Sicily, dad's educational and work achievements, his service to his country and community and all of the places dad lived and visited.

Is it possible to discover that singular moment that defined Frank Edward Henry, that colored and shaped the life that he has led? Each of us here today may see a different event, a different moment that created the man we have come to know and love. For my sisters and myself that singular life-changing moment was a June day in 1944, the day our dad married our mom. That moment was part of the story that mom and dad told us all of their lives, a story that they both lived and treasured for more than 60 years.

The story of that day in June 1944 really began a year or so earlier, though my sisters and I have never known the exact date their story began; if mom or dad remembered, they never revealed it to us. Just an ordinary Friday night, we suppose, at a USO dance held in the church hall of St. John's Cathedral in Charleston, South Carolina. The music is playing on the jukebox, maybe Chattanooga Choo Choo—mom's favorite song—a handsome sailor stands next to the jukebox, talking to his shipmates. A young woman—our beautiful mom, of course—sees the sailor from far across the room as she enters the hall, and she knows right then that she and the handsome sailor would fall in love and would make a beautiful life together.

My sisters and I have often wished that we could have been there that day, to witness that first "hello", to see that first touch, that first smile — was there a spark of electricity that they shared when their hands met as dad led mom to the dance floor? If only we could have seen the young woman and the handsome sailor enjoy that first dance, hear them speak those first tentative words: "What's your name?", "Where are you from?", "Do you come here often?" How many times each of us has tried to imagine seeing that first kiss — did mom and dad know even then that they would love each other a whole life long?

In the promise that dad spoke to mom at 7 AM that morning of June 17th, 1944 is the full measure, we believe, of the life our dad lived. Dad lived that promise every day of his life since then, and it became for him the most important moment of his life. Since that June day every thing our dad did was a reflection of that special day.

We have seen that first promise to love and cherish one another in all the other promises dad gave to

mom – he loved mom so much that he promised to her that no matter where they made a home, he would take her “home” each year to visit her family in South Carolina. And each year for almost all of the last 60 years, he kept that promise.

My sisters and I can tell you stories about those early trips “home”— about two, then three, then four kids in the back seat of a hot car, asking for every one of those unending miles, “are we almost there?”, arguing about who crossed over the imaginary line we had each drawn on the seat to designate our place. We laugh and smile at those memories now – the heat, the mosquitoes, the endless fields of tobacco and corn, the “burma shave” signs along the way, the picnic places where we stopped to eat the meals mom had prepared in advance. Dad taking mom “home” –18 very long hours from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in those early years, 750 miles, and dad did most of the driving. Our dad didn’t stop very often; he was focused on the job that was before him; he had a schedule to keep and a promise to fulfill.

Dad made a wonderful home for mom over the years, moving from job to job, going back to school to earn bachelor and master’s degrees in engineering, getting a professional engineering license, moving first to Maryland, then Arizona and then to Texas and finally the last stop on that long journey -- San Angelo -- because in doing so he made a better life for mom.

When mom started having trouble managing every day, dad took on more and more of the responsibilities -- caring for the car and the yard, handling the finances, doing repairs around the house –he always did those things. But dad learned to cook because mom just didn’t feel like doing it anymore, and he tried to keep the house up as well. And he took her to lunch every day – not that he liked restaurant food – but because mom really liked to go out to eat.

As the years passed and we began to have celebrations to focus on mom and dad’s lives together – first 40 years, then 50 years, then 60 years – people would ask my dad : “ to what do you owe the longevity of your marriage?” Dad would always answer with two sentences: If Bertha and I disagree on something, I always remember that “if I win, I lose” and that other statement that always elicited a smile “when Bertha says jump, I always ask “how high?”.

There are so many little stories my sisters and I can recall that show my dad was a man of great integrity, or that he had great courage and physical strength, or that his mind was always thinking, always trying to solve some new problem that he found for himself. It would take hours to describe to you how much he loved his children and all the ways he tried to help us find our way in life, how he tried to protect us from those big and little hurts. And there isn’t time enough to relate to you how much he loved his own mother and father and his brothers and sisters and how he helped them, in many little ways, even though he had a family of his own.

Dad lived a life that was so full of promise and new beginnings and love that it seems to my sisters and me that he lived the perfect life. We wish that dad were still here with us, talking and laughing, sharing these moments with us. But we know that dad is waiting on a cloud somewhere above us, waiting for the time when God calls mom “home” too, so that they can be together again. When our dad made that special promise to mom on that June morning in 1944, it was a promise that he meant to keep for eternity.

My sisters and I all hope that our dad left this life on earth recognizing what a great man he truly is, knowing that he has been and still is loved by his family and friends and that he will be greatly missed by all of us. Throughout our own lives my sisters and I will cherish our memories of our dad, holding on to the hope that sometime, in some eternity somewhere, we will be with this thoughtful and gentle man once again.