

**“We Remember Michael”  
Eulogy of Michael J. Phillips**

St. Therese Church  
May 16, 2009

*“When daybreak dawns tomorrow, how will my love find me?”*

*“Will it be in the warm sunlight that touches my cheek and welcomes me to another day?”*

*“Will it be in the heart-felt embrace that lets me know how deeply I am loved by thee?”*

*“Will it be in the reassuring voice that gives me protection from whatever troubles may find their way to me?”*

*“Or, will it be in the enduring smile that touches my very soul and the kiss upon my cheek that assures me of thy own true love?”*

When daybreak dawns tomorrow, each of us gathered here this morning will share a commonality.

We will miss the tender touch, the hearty embrace, the reassuring voice.

We will long for the enduring smile or the kiss upon our cheek.

For when daybreak dawns tomorrow we will only begin the challenge of facing each day without the comfort of having Michael J. Phillips in our lives.

Considering all that we have been through since Wednesday afternoon—when Michael was suddenly called home to Our Father—perhaps we must count on our ability to cope with this great loss measured in days at a time rather than trying to see too far, or deal with too much, into the future.

And so, we gather together this morning to remember, honor, and celebrate the life of our beloved Michael: a devoted father, son, brother, brother-in-law, uncle, nephew, cousin, and friend.

On behalf of this congregation, I extend my heartfelt sympathies to Michael's children, to Michael, Natalie, Patrick, and Timothy; to his parents "Balbo" and Sarah; to Darlene and Jimmy, "Dee Dee" and Anthony, Louie and Nancy, Marianne and "Vinnie"; to his many aunts and uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins; and to all those who Michael loved so dearly in his lifetime.

We thank you for allowing us to reflect on the life of someone who was truly special; someone who had so many gifts and who shared them so freely with others; someone who has left an indelible mark on all of us.

As I span across the congregation this morning and reflect back on the hundreds of people who attend yesterday's wake service; I see the faces of the people whose lives were forever changed by God's unique gift to us—the gift of Michael Phillips.

I see the faces of Michael's boyhood friends from Chinatown—those who made the journey from youth to manhood. Your friendships with Michael date back nearly 50 years and you have cherished memories that will carry you forward.

As Vinnie recalled the other evening about life with Michael, "we laughed every single day we were together. My mother used to say that if laughs were made of money, we would have been multi-millionaires."

Michael had that unique ability to relate to people from all walks of life: from political statesmen to laborers, from judges to policemen. He knew thousands of people and they knew whenever they needed something—from help with a charity fundraiser to an assist in finding work when times were tough—Michael was always there.

I see the faces of the workers he employed and the clients who benefited from Michael's talents as a homebuilder and rehabber. He was a self-educated person, learning his trade from others who went before him in the neighborhood.

As a young man, Michael would earn a few dollars by eagerly hauling away debris at a work site and slowly but surely learned all there was to know about the home construction business.

Because he had an extraordinary work ethic and a moral compass that dealt with people fairly and honestly, Michael's reputation grew and he became known as someone you could count on to watch over your hard-earned dollars and to help build the home of your dreams.

Dee Dee shared how each member of her family has been blessed to have homes they could be proud of because Michael either built them or gave sound advice along the way. "He had impeccable taste and he was a real estate genius," she said.

Michael took great pride and joy in the homes that he lived in as well and looked forward to inviting all of his family and friends over to the place he called "paradise" for holidays, birthday parties, and other get-togethers.

Whenever Michael set out to do something, he always went all out.

Once, he got an idea to throw a party with a Hawaiian theme. He brought in carpenters to build a stage and a Tiki bar in his back yard and he even had Hula dancers perform. Everyone had to come dressed in Hawaiian garb.

With Michael, every day was a day to enjoy life and he found a way to put a smile on your face. He had a great sense of humor and always looked to pull a playful prank.

If your stay in "Paradise" lasted beyond his 2 a.m. curfew, Michael would sneak away and turn on the lawn sprinklers, soaking everyone and sending them for the exits.

I look out this morning and I see the faces of our youth.

Darlene shared how Michael lived for his children—how they were the pride and joy of his life.

From the multiple nicknames he gave to each of them to celebrating their half-birthdays and actual birthdays, his life evolved around Michael, Natalie, Patrick and Timothy.

When his own birthday would arrive, Michael would come home with presents for the kids.

He loved gathering the kids and heading out on family vacations. Michael would drive near and far and among the most memorable family trips were those to the Grand Canyon, Mt. Rushmore, Disneyworld, the Lake of the Ozarks, and swimming with the dolphins in Mexico. It was in Disneyland, where Michael found himself in the middle of a music video after a night of karaoke.

His love and generosity extended to his nieces and nephews as well for he loved them as though they were his very own. Last night, in the quiet of the chapel, after all the others had gone home, they gathered with their immediate family to bid farewell to their beloved uncle. It was a poignant tribute to the man they loved so much.

When Maryann's son Vincent was celebrating his prom, the limousine never came to take him and his friends. Michael pulled up in a brand new Cadillac Escalade. When he learned what happened, he threw Vincent the keys to his new truck and had all the kids pile inside. Maryann was a nervous wreck but Michael and Vinny just laughed out loud as they pulled away in Vinny's beat-up car.

Michael loved cars and it seemed like he had a new one to drive almost every week. He'd always have the kids off balance when picking them up from school or after practice because they never knew which car he was pulling up in.

His very first car, he bought from Louie for \$50.

It was a 1967 Belvedere and it had seen better days. That didn't deter Michael. He put a can around the rusted muffler pipe and bought a new starter. He installed it himself after reading the directions and then he buffed the car and waxed it—making it look almost new.

When Louie saw how nice the car looked, he took it out that evening without thinking of asking Michael first. When he came out of a local bar around one o'clock in the morning the car wouldn't start.

After getting a ride home, Louie found the brand new starter in the hallway. Michael went and found the car and took his newly-installed starter home. Louie recalled how the starter made its way in and out of that car several times.

I close my eyes and I see the people who are the most difficult to envision: the working poor and the marginalized of society.

In his obituary in the *Sun-Times*, it was written that “no man had a bigger heart or a more generous spirit.”

The times that Michael reached out to help others are too countless to mention and we can only guess as to how many of those less fortunate he helped when no one was around to witness his charity. But, one story stands out.

Several years ago, Michael was placing an ad for one of his properties at the *Bridgeport News*. Nearby, he overheard a conversation between a worker at the Bridgeport Travel agency and an elderly nun.

Michael could tell something was amiss and so he asked what was going on. He was told that the nun had misunderstood the cost of her flight to see her family back home and didn't have enough money to pay for her trip.

Without hesitation, Michael pulled money out of his pocket and placed it on the counter. “Here,” he said, “this should cover it, but if it doesn't let me know.” And, with that, he quickly left the office before he could be thanked.

The good sister was truly touched by Michael's generosity and asked the worker if she knew who he was. She was given Michael's name and address. She sent him a thank you card and a friendship was formed.

Now, 96 years old, Sister Mary Jo volunteers at Mercy Hospital. Whenever Sarah or a family member is sick and taken to Mercy, Sister Mary Jo always comes to visit.

On Wednesday, when Michael was rushed to Mercy and the paramedics and doctors worked valiantly to save him, Sister Mary Jo was there, too. Praying for him and no doubt asking God to usher Michael into the kingdom of heaven.

It is said that the mark of a good person can be traced to his upbringing and the values taught by his parents.

Indeed, Michael exhibited the wonderful traits of Sarah and Balbo.

His incredible love for family and friends were lessons taught at an early age by his parents.

Michael learned about being welcoming to others and sharing whatever he had from Sarah. In later years, he would visit every possible Sunday morning to join Sarah and Balbo for breakfast and to show them how much he loved and appreciated them.

Last Sunday—on Mother's Day—he gathered with the rest of the family to honor Sarah. It started with Mass and flowers he bought her, then dinner at the house on 24<sup>th</sup> Street. It may have been Michael's last day with his entire family but the symbolism of Mother's Day should never be lost by us.

He stressed the importance of family meals and expected his kids to be at the table each night for dinner.

Balbo has long been known as the guy in the neighborhood who anyone can turn to and he has befriended many. He even stepped out and attended AA meetings to help a local kid turn his life around.

Years later, Michael found himself in a similar situation when the friend of one of his own sons reached out to him in desperation and he didn't hesitate to lend a helping hand.

Michael had a formidable presence yet he had an incredibly sensitive side.

When he was growing up, the family dog had died and Maryann, as the youngest in the family, took it especially hard. Michael went out and bought a puppy and placed it in the bed next to her. From the doorway, he watched as Maryann became aware of the puppy cuddling next to her.

When Dee Dee and Anthony were about to be married, she had registered for her shower gifts and one of the items she wanted was a spice rack. When Michael learned she did not receive the gift, he nickled and dimed Sarah and Balbo for loose change and went back and forth to the Chinatown bazaar to buy raffle tickets. At the end of the day, he came home not with a toy tucked under his arms but a spice rack.

From early on in his life, Michael learned how small acts of kindness would have a huge impact on others.

Those acts of kindness played themselves out thousands of times over the years and we find comfort in knowing that Michael's acts were not lost in the passage of time: from the constant flow of food to the Phillips family home, to the steady stream of mourners at the chapel, from the poignant prayers and comments from the Saint Rocco Society to the turnout at this Mass, it is apparent that all that Michael did for others was very much appreciated.

And so today, we not only face the sadness of saying farewell to Michael, we must cope with the realization that his passing has left an incredible void in all of our lives.

The *Book of Psalms* says: "All the days ordained to me were written in Your book before one of them came to be."

Yes, indeed, Michael left us too soon. We are shocked by his passing and saddened that we will not have him in our physical presence in the days and years that follow.

And so, in closing, where does all of this leave us?

It no doubt leaves us with unanswered questions but that is where our individual faith and trust in God comes into play.

We can take comfort in knowing that Michael truly enjoyed his life. He acted out his dreams and he helped make dreams come true for others. That in itself is an incredible accomplishment and one so many of us yearn for.

It also leaves us with the realization that no one person could fill Michael's shoes. He had that uncanny ability to do so much and people like him come along but once in a lifetime.

But, together, 10 or 20 of us can.

And, that perhaps is the most fitting way we can honor his legacy.

All through his life, Michael showered us with gifts. It is only fitting to return those favors.

Stay close to Michael's family. Encircle your love around Michael, Natalie, Patrick, and Timothy. Nurture them and protect them as Michael would have done.

And then, watch as they grow and carry out his good works and deeds. We already can see the promise in each of them and realize how they too, have learned from the love of caring parents. As the years go by, we will see Michael's love and enduring spirit shining through in each of them.

Stay close to Balbo and Sarah and to one another. Enjoy the days that follow for they will get easier. Lean on one another when the storm clouds reappear. For they will and it is much easier to face them together than alone.

Finally, be good. Be good people. Be good to one another and to others.

For sometime down the road, when the Good Lord calls each of us home, there will be someone peeking out from behind the pearly gates. He won't be able to hold back his excitement when he sees you approaching.

St. Peter will say to him, "be patient." And there, with his incredible smile and open arms (right behind the Lord, or course!), will be Michael. He will help welcome you into Paradise: a place where there might not be a 2 a.m. curfew but don't be surprised if a certain someone still has control of the lawn sprinklers.

I know in my heart that Michael can hear us this morning. He has heard our prayers and petitions and our remembrances.

Thank you, Michael, for all that you have done for us: For the many gifts of friendship, laughter, courage, and generosity.

Know that we will continue to depend on you for guidance and love.

Thank you again, Michael. Thank you for *everything!*

May the Good Lord bless you and keep you forever close to His heart. We promise that we will always do the same.