

Tom Foerster
by
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I couldn't look up but I somehow knew the sun set too early last Tuesday afternoon. It was a gloomy day in the neighborhood. Tom Foerster, my hero and my uncle had passed on to the other side to be with God.

They say he was an institution in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. Maybe so. That never mattered to me. It never mattered to any of my brothers or sisters growing up because the way he cared about us was everything that made him an institution to us. His generosity to us and to everyone we saw him encounter was never ending.

As he was a bachelor most of his life, he used to meet my brothers and sisters at Conneaut Lake whenever we and he had a chance to break away on a summer weekend. My uncle would sometimes make his way to the basketball court where we were playing. He could shoot these monster two hand shots just short of half-court. He would rarely miss. After we were done playing, we'd get in the rowboat while he used to swim all the way across the lake. Then he'd swim back again. We used to look at each other marveling at his strength, determination and perseverance.

While swimming, he used to playfully sing "Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore" in honor of my little brother Michael who rowed his five year old heart out as we took turns with the oars. Then my uncle used to laugh a big, hearty laugh whenever we blurted out something that struck him funny which was often.

After he was done swimming, his work had only begun. He'd quickly take out the charcoal and put it on the grill. Next, he'd make us the most incredible dinners, chicken and corn on the cob were everywhere and huckleberry pie came from who knows where. If visitors walking by or kids on bike happened to be coming through, he'd always invite them. He lived life with a passion, a remarkable passion.

But if I could say one thing to sum up my uncle, it would simply be this: he was Catholic. I don't proclaim that in a provincial way because all the beautiful Christian faiths are the color of the rainbow shining through a single prism to me. I say that in the kindred sense that his strong commitment to faith made him humble. And it was within his humility that he was great. He was larger than life to all who knew him best because he lived each and every day like it was his last with a genuine care and concern for each person he met, especially the poor.

Like my uncle, I married later in life. And on my wedding day this past October, I can still picture him sitting inconspicuously in the last row. When I walked down the aisle to exit with my wife Dana, I was astonished to find him there last of all the invited guests.

He then broke out into the biggest smile I ever saw him smile and he gave me the thumbs up sign, shook my hand and approvingly beamed, "way to go Ray."

And while my uncle showed us all how to live by his example, he also showed us the way to meet death. During the funeral of his close friend, he got up to speak and delivered a gem. Somehow he let the sunshine come in on that mournful day. He had us smiling. There were no sad good-byes. There was only a spirit-filled chant that resounded "life is good, God is great and death is but a step to our next journey." My uncle greeted the heartfelt death of his friend as he greeted life - all out.

With our voices cracking as we fought back the tears, my brothers and I tried to wake my uncle from his coma last Sunday. "It's time to wake up Uncle Tom," I murmured as I tried to maintain some sense of composure. Suddenly my uncle opened his eyes for a moment or two. Perhaps he fought valiantly so we could connect one final time. And then sadly, he closed his eyes again.

I don't know if Heaven looks like Allegheny County. But I'm sure Tom Foerster is not biding his time, basking in radiance on the glory wagon. I have a feeling he's up there on his knees praying for the rest of us.

Thank you God for giving us Uncle Tom.



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