

Eulogy for Donald Joseph Wassel
Friday, October 28th, 2005 / St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church, Crystal Lake,
Illinois
&
Saturday, November 26th, 2005 / St. John's Catholic Church, Folsom, Louisiana



First, I would like to thank everyone so much for coming today. I know some of you have traveled a good distance.

I've only been a father for about three years; but I have already learned that kids can make their parents laugh, cry, or even do both at the same time.

One dad's favorite stories about me making him cry was the first time he took me to a spook house, which was at our elementary school in Indianapolis. For those of you who don't know, Dad was quite an artist, and he lent his talents to decorating that spook house. I was probably 3 or 4, and Dad must have been carrying me on his hip like this as all moms and dads do. I think it was a vampire that came out of a shadowy corner to bare his fangs and scare us, and I was so scared that I promptly sunk my teeth into Dad's neck. He probably didn't cry on the outside that Halloween, but surely I made him cry on the inside.

Halloween was always a very fun time with Dad; it played right into his talents, and his sense of humor. One of my favorite memories of Dad is from my high school years, and how we would decorate. We lived in an old stucco house; it had a short flight of stairs that led to the front door. To the right of the door was a big screened in porch that extended out from the front. I came up with the idea to turn the screened in porch into a graveyard, but it was his creativity that took off from there. He helped me make tombstones out of old boxes, and we brought in old dead branches and leaves, hung cobwebs, setup a stereo to play creepy sounds, and really turned it into something very unique and eerie. This was years before Halloween became the big decorating event that it is now, so Dad was really ahead of his time. To top it all off, he made this grim reaper ghost that hung from the ceiling inside the porch. It had these arms that were spread out like a vulture, and it gave you this eerie feeling like it was going to reach out and grab you. He hid a black light that made the whole thing glow – and I mean glow. You could see this thing for blocks. Cars would stop in the middle of the street to look at this thing. He put an oscillating fan on it so it would appear to move on its own, and he had chains and things underneath the ghost so it would make weird noises when it would move. The first year we did this some kids wouldn't even come up the steps. And we would laugh until we cried watching their reactions. We probably had left over candy that year from the kids who just decided not to come up at all.

Dad came from a humble but proud background. His mom and dad were immigrants to the Indianapolis area from Slovenia. From what I know, he did not grow up having a lot. I remember him telling me that he would get presents like an apple with a dime stuck in it at Christmas – such a contrast from how it is now. He was 4 years old when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and 8 on D-Day, making him a child of the greatest generation, and I remember him telling that things like taking casual car trips was just not done because gas – and just about everything else – was rationed for the war effort.

I am sure all of these things shaped him into the dad my sister and I knew, and as I have grown older and become more of a student of history I have come to understand him better and love him more.

Dad's loving fault, I think, was that he probably made things too easy for my sister and me when we were younger. I think that was born not only out of love, but also out of wanting us to have it easier than he did. As I look back though, I can see how he started letting me try to stand on my own two feet even when he knew I wasn't ready. He knew that life is not easy, and that – more than anything else – that was what I needed to learn.

I remember when he dropped me off at college. Just before he left, he looked at me and said simply, "Two things: first, don't fall in love until after you graduate. Second, (No offense to any attorneys in attendance) I forbid you to study law." Well, Dad was right that I needed to learn some things the hard way. There were things about university life for which I was not ready. But I got half of his instructions right, and did not become a lawyer.

I remember when I moved far from home on my own for the first time. Surely he knew I was even less ready for the real world than I was for college, and oh how I found that out. I can still see him standing in the back hallway of the house and simply saying, "there's a big world out there waiting for you, so go out there and grab it."

He used to tell me all the time that he wished he had done a better job as a father; I am sure this is something all parents feel the same in retrospect. But I would always reply right back and tell him what a great dad he was and had been. And I hope every time I told him, he felt how much I meant it. Not too long ago – just before our son was born - I asked him if he thought we were ready to become parents. He looked back at me, raised an eyebrow and said, "You two are as ready as couple I have ever seen". He may have meant to pay me and Sue a compliment, but I hope that somewhere in that moment – in at least some small way – he felt like he – and Mom – had been very good parents.

I never asked him how he would have liked to have been better so I will never know. But the things I will cherish about being his son are not where we lived or what we had, but the little things. When we lived in Indianapolis, he worked for RCA in new products development. He would bring home electronics from time to time, and one of his loves was a big console stereo that was in our living room. I don't remember the TV being on that much in that house, but I remember the stereo being on all the a lot. I would play on the floor in front of it and play and listen to the music. To this day, every time I hear Jackie DeShannon / What the World Needs Now, or the Fifth Dimension, or a Burt Bacharach song, or the Boston Pops play "Sleighride", it's just like I am playing on that living room floor at 3710 Luewan Drive in front of that stereo with my toys. To this day I can remember how my sister would dance when Petula Clark would come through those speakers singing "Downtown".

When we lived in Michigan, we took many camping trips. Our favorite camp was a place called Strawberry Lake, and we always tent camped in the most remote part of the park. There were no motors allowed on the lake, and the water was so clear we could look over the side of our fishing boat and see the fish hitting our lures. We would fish at night

a lot, and after we would finish, we would lie in the bottom of the boat and count shooting stars from the Persiad meteor shower that comes every August.

When I moved back to this area after my tennis playing days, we started a Father's Day golf outing tradition. In a fun way, he used to get aggravated that I was playing less than he was, yet I was going home with the "title" as we called it. If he was falling behind on the scorecard, he would wait until I was at the top of my backswing on a particularly crucial shot or lining up a putt, and say something like "nice form". I still managed to keep the "title" for several years running – in spite of the friendly heckling. Then the last Father's Day before Mom and Dad moved south he got the best of me. I would like to say he heckled me and I fell apart, but he didn't need to heckle that day. He beat me fair and square. So for those of you who think they moved south to have fun and enjoy warm weather – now you know the truth. He had won back the title, and he was going to do anything it took to keep it – even if he had to move 900 miles away to do it.

And, of course, there are the fun memories of Halloween, and here we are in that very season, gathering to remember him. We did a little extra decorating around our house this year as we thought about him. I think he would like that.

In parting, my hope is that when it is my son's day to stand up here, he will have as many fond memories of his dad as I do of mine.