

Remarks at the Memorial Service for Dr. Francis J. Michelini
Weckesser Hall
Wilkes University
October 15, 2019
Thomas F. Kelly

Bear with me, because I, too, will use the 1972 Flood as a lens through which to view Dr. Michelini's character and leadership, although I will share a perspective with you that is different from the one Dr. Breiseth has articulately described.

All heroes have special moments.

And, "Dr. Mike", as we affectionately called him, was a true hero, in my perspective.

His heroic moment - that I remember, most clearly, took place immediately after the 1972 Flood which took place in June of that year.

In that catastrophic event, all 52 of Wilkes' buildings were inundated up to the second floor. After the floodwaters receded, Dr. Mike called upon Faculty and Administrative Staff to assemble. Many of us were in the process of dealing with flood damage to our own homes or were living temporarily with relatives or friends or in Red Cross Shelters. But we found way to campus.

There in the Weckesser Hall parking lot, just outside of this building, we stood in the mud – waiting to hear what President Michelini would tell us. As we stood there, we wondered and talked among ourselves as to whether or not the College would survive or, if it did, what would be the state of that survival. Would Wilkes need to cut costs so severely that some of us would not retain our jobs throughout the coming year or, indeed, even throughout the summer? Would the students return to Wilkes in September or transfer elsewhere? Would freshmen parents allow their sons and daughters to come to a campus so badly damaged?

Amidst that uncertainty and the devastation of the entire campus, as well as the widespread damage to much of the city of Wilkes-Barre and the nearby communities, Dr. Mike stood there in the mud with us - with a bull horn in his hand.

Confidently, he told us that Wilkes would not only survive, but that it would emerge as a stronger and better institution. He emphasized that we would open our doors for a new academic year in September, and we would communicate with returning students and the incoming freshman class to tell them and their parents that Wilkes would be cleaned-up and ready for them.

As we listened, we gulped - because we only had about two months to make this happen.

However, Dr. Mike assured us that we could do it because saving Wilkes was a noble and worthy task, and he knew we had a spirit of commitment to make it happen.

And, then, he reminded us what education was all about – and to what Wilkes, at its core, was dedicated. He said that the very essence of education occurs when good teachers interact with good students. He said that, at Wilkes, we had accomplished faculty members and talented students - aided by effective administrators – and that this was all needed in order to move forward.

Dr. Mike said that he would ask us to work harder and longer than we had ever been asked to do before. Some of us would do manual labor in addition to our regular jobs. Others would be assigned to difficult, challenging tasks. He told us this was an historic opportunity and one for which we would rise to the occasion.

His inspiration was contagious, his confidence made our spirits rise, and we became ready for the job.

Throughout the next month we reported every morning to the Weckesser Hall parking lot to get our assignment for the day.

However, my assignment was a bit different:

Dr. Mike gave me a battlefield commission of sorts.

Because I had worked with Dr. Farley on institutional advancement and fundraising, Dr. Mike immediately promoted me, at then, age 25, to the position of Director of Development, and told me to get to work on the third floor of Weckesser Hall, which hadn't been damaged by the floodwaters, for the purpose of identifying foundations, corporations, and individuals - outside of Wyoming Valley - who could provide immediate financial support for Wilkes... and to send letters to them asking if we could visit to discuss this most urgent need.

He also suggested that I communicate on his behalf with some of the members of the Board of Trustees so we could enlist their help in identifying possible donors who were within their respective networks. In that process we were able to secure support from former Pennsylvania Governor William Scranton who made numerous important contacts that opened many doors for us. As you know, Gov. Scranton would later go forward to become the United States Ambassador to the United Nations.

Throughout that summer Dr. Mike and I flew to Pittsburgh, Detroit, and Battle Creek; and we drove to Philadelphia and New York City more times than I can remember. We visited foundations like the Richard King Mellon Foundation, the US Steel Foundation, the Gulf Oil Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the Kellogg Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Ford Motors Fund, and the Pew Charitable Trust - to mention but a few.

In each one of these visits Dr. Mike was so articulate and explicit that I felt as though the program directors could feel and smell the mud when Dr. Mike told them how the shelves or stacks in the library split apart with the pressure of the floodwaters, thus tumbling the books into the mud that covered the floor - just as it covered everything else on campus. He spoke about how he stood in the library in the mud trying to pick out books that might be salvaged in some way. He described the devastating scenes in the significantly damaged classrooms and laboratories - as well as the Center for the Performing Arts and the Gymnasium.

Dr. Mike came across as someone who was a charismatic leader, with great energy, and a great strategic plan to restore Wilkes. They saw his significant commitment to this task - and to Wilkes. I could see the respect rising in the eyes

of those with whom we met. No one could have been more articulate, more persuasive, or more sincere than Dr. Mike. His grace and skill in communicating with people served as a sterling example for me as I later developed my career.

In the end, Wilkes received a large grant from almost foundation or corporation with whom we met.

Now, I might add, as a touch of humor, that in traveling with Dr. Mike, I quickly learned that when he was in a major city, he liked to have lunch in a delicatessen so he could have a corned beef sandwich on rye – and he also liked Chinese food - so we almost always went to a nice Chinese restaurant for dinner. Fortunately, for me, I liked both!

In the meantime, the flood recovery effort continued on campus. The money that we raised provided unrestricted, flexible dollars to complement the large amount of federal aid that had begun to arrive - \$4 million of which was delivered here to Weckesser Hall by then Pres. Nixon. But the Federal aid came with restrictions, as to its application. So, both private and Federal support were necessary to resuscitate Wilkes.

And... we opened our doors to students that September!

All of this had worked well on-campus because we highly respected and loved Dr. Mike.

All of this worked well off-campus on our visits because Dr. Mike was respected and trusted by those with whom we met.

When Wilkes faced perhaps the most significant threat in its history - when Wilkes surely needed to have a hero to lead it through this ordeal – Dr. Mike was there...and Wilkes can forever be grateful.

But every hero needs to have, in their family, those who love them and support them. This was true of Dr. Mike's wife, Annmarie, and their three daughters, Michelle, Lisa, and Cia. They were Dr. Mike's A-Team in terms of sustaining his efforts on behalf of Wilkes.

Lisa recently shared with me that within the past few weeks she found a photograph of her mother and her cleaning mud off classroom chairs in the Weckesser Hall parking lot. Such was their commitment to Dr. Mike's work.

In that spirit, we extend our deepest sympathy to Michelle, Lisa, and Cia, and we thank them for lending this absolutely extraordinary individual to us at Wilkes... for are all the better for having known Dr. Mike.

My final thoughts, today, go to a conversation that I had with Dr. Mike about a year ago when I walked with him to his car. He and Dr. Breiseth had invited me to join them for a day to provide some oral history for the historical book that they were writing about Wilkes. As we reached the car, Dr. Mike said, "You know, Tom, at my age I have begun thinking more and more what the after-life will be like." I couldn't help but say, "I am, too; but let's not find out about it too soon." Dr. Mike laughed and then said: I think the after-life is not to be feared, but to be explored.

In that spirit, let me close by paraphrasing an old Gaelic blessing for Dr. Mike:

May the road rise to meet you,

May the wind be always at your back,

May the sun shine warmly on your shoulders and the rain fall gently upon your fields,

And may the Good Lord hold you in the very hollow of His great hand.

Thank you.