

Michael J. LoCurto

A Life Well Lived

by Sal Martoche

I'm not certain I've ever encountered a person so many people feel so strongly about and speak so lovingly and respectfully about as Michael LoCurto. Many of you will remember that Michael was the North District councilman in Buffalo from 2006 - 2015 and that he later served as deputy commissioner in the Department of Environment and Planning for Erie County.

It is beyond dispute that Michael, who suffered from a rare blood disorder, was a champion for the little people of this world and a fierce advocate for the City of Buffalo. These were his passions, and they led him to establish standards of independence and integrity that guided both his personal life and political career.

Michael led the charge to stop the big-box development of the Buffalo waterfront that he knew would impede the very world-class growth that has since led to an exciting and valuable community asset. He also gave us the Little Italy designation that has helped Hertel Avenue become vibrant once again. The countless people he helped with their everyday concerns are equally important, though not so visible.

Michael grew up on Wellington Road in North Buffalo and lived on that street his entire life. His fiery advocacy for the working person is clearly a result of his incredibly strong relationship with his father and mother, Dennis and Joan (Feroleto) LoCurto. Dennis was a cement mason and union officer and Joan a schoolteacher. And they were also Michael's best friends, according to person after person with whom I spoke. Michael's younger sister, Tina, was one of his biggest advocates and fans.

Sean Cooney, a prominent lawyer in Buffalo and a close friend, says of Michael, "He was so charismatic and appealing and both serious and funny at the same time that you couldn't help but love the guy once you knew him." Jay Randazzo, his boyhood friend who remained close to him all of his life, echoed those thoughts, as did another boyhood friend, P. J. Battaglia, who observed, "Michael was born an old man and was a kid at the same time."

Randazzo said about his dear friend Michael:

I never really thought of my friend as a politician. He was just a guy who wanted to protect the underdog. This conviction is really his lasting legacy as a public figure. And while it's true that he never let his illness get in the way, it certainly helped define him. He was a warrior in spite of his illness and because of it. Through his 46-year fight, he showed the rest of us what we all should strive to be.

Michael never talked about a serious health problem he had from birth. He never felt sorry for himself; he never let it interfere with what he wanted to do with his life. But there is no denying that it shaped how he thought and acted in equal measure with his relationship with his family and friends. Michael was born with Thalassemia Major, commonly known as Cooley's Anemia, an inherited blood disorder that causes severe iron overload, which is dangerous and ultimately fatal in most instances.

In 1994, Michael had one of the first simultaneous heart and liver transplants in the United States. It was performed at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and, as you would expect, Michael's parents were at his side every minute. Before the surgery, Dennis and Michael were alone in his room. Dennis sat on the edge of his bed, his face ashen and his eyes full of tears, prepared to have a very difficult conversation with his son, saying in a low voice, "Son, there's something I have to say to you." Michael responded, "No, Dad, I know. There's no need for words," and the two sat in silence for a few minutes. Their silence said it all. Michael told nobody except a few close friends about the seriousness of his physical condition and it was quite clear that he understood that, at 22, his life might be over.

His mother was his personal Joan of Arc throughout his life. When she heard her four-month-old son crying from pain caused by the IV insertions into his tiny arms, she sobbed uncontrollably. At that very moment, she was



Buffalo City Councilman, Michael J. LoCurto, 2007

determined to protect Michael as much as possible. As always, she set about to make things better not only for Michael but for other tiny patients. She was instrumental in changing hospital policy to insure that nurses and technicians throughout the hospital were better experienced and trained in IV insertions in infants.

Joan also recounted an exchange with Michael when he was receiving one of his many transfusions. He looked at this mother and asked, "Mom, when do you and Dad get your transfusions?" She held back tears and did her best to explain.

"It broke my heart to hear him say that. He thought everyone must get transfusions. It was Michael's normal," she said. Joan was a champion for innovation in the fight against this terrible disease, not only for her much-loved son but for all who suffered with it.

Michael survived that operation and months of rehabilitation to get back to "his normal," which still involved significant physical limitations. Through it all, Michael, stoic Michael, kind Michael, funny Michael, endured. He not only kept a smile on the faces of his family but also those of his friends and the medical staff who worked so hard to keep him alive. Michael told the Buffalo News in a 2009 interview, "You have to play the cards you're dealt. I always try to control the circumstances and not let the circumstances control me."

In 2007, he was diagnosed with kidney disease and

almost two years later received a kidney transplant at the same Pittsburgh hospital. The donor of that kidney was his partner of five years at the time, Kate Foster. This courageous and loving woman was then the head of the SUNY Buffalo Regional Institute. Later, she served as the president of two universities for more than a decade.

A few days after the transplant, Michael quipped to her and his family and friends, "It's certainly better than the iPhone I got from her for Christmas" before getting serious and calling the transplant a tremendous gift.

As you might expect of someone like Michael, he became a champion for organ donations and transplants and the need for more donors. Russ Crispell, Sean Cooney's father-in-law, made this poignant observation:

Not many people can walk through life's journey with as much passion and love for fellow citizens of Western New York as Michael did. Michael was one of those individuals whose light will continue to shine for many, many years to come ... His life will always be remembered each time I look up in the night sky and no doubt the brightest beam of light will be from a star that is Michael looking down and smiling at us.

Michael's life calls to mind something my mother used to say: "You die twice, the first time when your remains are laid to rest, and the second time when you are forgotten and no one speaks of you anymore." By this gauge, Michael LoCurto might become as immortal as some of those characters in the movies he loved so much.



LoCurtos: Michael, Joan, Tina and Dennis.1993