

John S. Siffert

I remember the moment. It was 1998, just before the annual Law and Society Luncheon honoring Bob Fiske. It had sold out. I was new to the Board. Michael called me to take back two seats at the table our law firm had purchased for the luncheon. I paused and asked “what’s it worth to you?” Without missing a beat, he offered “two future draft picks.” That’s when I knew I loved him.

I was among the fortunate to have seen Michael’s genius up close and personal. David Brodsky’s words about him in today’s New York Times obituary on behalf of Emeritus Board cannot be improved upon. He was “a champion for people in communities in need”, and he was “relentlessly creative” in finding new ways to fund and support the mission of NYLPI.

Michael’s accomplishments are many, and the breadth of his vision was astonishing. For years to come, they will remain embodied in the work of New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, whose staff will carry on his beloved mission. But I hope that Zerline, Brice, Garon and Zaya will remember the ephemeral parts of him that could not be held in the palms of their hands.

I still see his smile and his twinkling eye. He had an imagination -- like a Mary Poppins’ bag from which he seemed effortlessly able to come up with a new approach or strategy. He was funny --although I never thought his puns were as good as he did. He was competitive and loved a challenge --and invariably he won. Then there was his charm -- he could get anybody to do anything when he put his mind to it. Before you knew it, he had enlisted you in another crusade to bring justice to the under-served communities of New York.

In the past three days, I have spoken to many people about Michael. I have heard them express every emotion imaginable: love, inspiration, admiration, respect, pride, gratitude, guilt, grief, despair --and even anger that he could not be saved.

Michael still generates all of these feelings in all of us because he was that singular person who --if you are lucky--you get to meet once in a lifetime. He got what life’s struggles are about. He got how important it is to make a difference in lives of people who cannot help themselves.

We grieve his loss. We wanted him to do even more. We wanted him to give even more of himself. But in the end, he had given it all to others.

Now it is his time to rest in peace.

For one, I will always be waiting for my two future draft picks.

David Brodsky

I am honored beyond words to have been asked to speak briefly about Michael. I loved Michael as did everyone in this room and beyond who had the great fortune to know him personally – to know the brilliance, creativity, humor, compassion, the love, the persistence, all that made Michael a charismatic leader and friend to all of us.

In this time of terrible grief, we struggle to answer how a person as vital and as critical in our lives could be lost to his family, to us, to this City and society, so early and so incomprehensibly.

We need more people like Michael. How can it be that we could lose someone so loving, so necessary?

The learned sages of our major religions tell us that these are unanswerable questions, that we must face an unfathomable event like losing Michael with no good answers for why.

As unsatisfying as that is, we are left with our thoughts and memories of when we were with him in better times, and we hope that such memories will gradually become a salve for the open wound that we all bear, but especially Michael's beloved wife Zerline and their three children, Brice, Garon, and Zaya.

Michael told me that we first met when he was a law student at NYU interning at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, but I don't remember that occasion.

I do remember a few years later when Joan Vermeulen, the Executive Director, came to the Board to ask to hire Michael as her deputy. We were in a funding crunch at the time and staff was tight but one conversation with Michael was enough for us to decide that we had to have him on board.

I've met and interviewed 100's of young lawyers in over 4 decades of lawyering but I've never met anyone who captured the attention of those he spoke to like M.

Four years later, Joan recommended that Michael succeed her as ED of New York Lawyers. Michael was 36 years old and had never run a nonprofit organization before. But it was the easiest and best decision of any we made as an Executive Committee.

Michael was a visionary -- creative, driven, energetic; he spurred every person he worked with to try harder, to think more deeply, to envision strategies to help the less advantaged among us, to find ways to help those left out of the system get back into the system. Michael called on us to be our best selves and, inspired by his own passion and dedication, we responded.

I had conversations with Michael every few days for years until I stepped off the Board a few years ago, and then at least every week or 10 days. We discussed everything and sometimes we disagreed, but always Michael came back again and again offering new ideas to accomplish his lofty goals.

The one time that we had what could possibly be described as a spat was over the name of the non-profit that Michael directed: I have always referred to it as NYLP I, and Michael always referred to it as NILPEE. He wanted me to pronounce it his way. I refused. I gave a talk once at a Felix Fishman Award Luncheon and referred to the organization in my way, and he came up to me afterwards, and asked me why I wouldn't just adopt his branding of the organization as NILPEE. I told him I wouldn't because it sounded ugly to me. He disagreed, and said No, it was how people referred to the organization. And we parted that afternoon without agreeing.

A short time later, to celebrate my 65th birthday, he asked me and David Stern, the executive director of Equal Justice Works and a regular co-conspirator with Michael over the years, who is here today, to go on a special half day birthday adventure. He then proceeded to take us on a luncheon tour of small and obscure Korean, Thai, and Chinese restaurants in lower Manhattan. None had more than 5 tables, and Michael knew the chefs and waiters in all of them. Each place had a specialty item and Michael knew what each place's specialty was. We started off with kim-chee at one Korean place near his office, then graduated to dim sum downtown, then ramen noodles at a third place, and so on, and gradually worked our way to green tea ice cream. We must have eaten at 9 or 10 restaurants over 4 hours. At the end, as we parted, Michael gave me a big hug, wished me a happy birthday and said that I could call NYLPI by any name I wanted.

That afternoon will stay with me for a long time: it was such a metaphor for how David and I, and I suspect many of you, interacted with Michael: he had a goal and a vision of how to get there, and he set out the path, and we followed, because we trusted his preparation and knowledge, his judgment and his wisdom, and it was all done in great good humor.

Michael was an idea factory: luncheons, a golf tournament, an art show, the Felix Fishman award, the Emeritus Board, the Board of Advisors, the capital campaign launched at the very time when the economy was collapsing, the NY Times competition, the I Heart NY photography exhibit. Every one of these ideas, and many more, he willed into being.

And he was a genius at marketing: the hats, the briefcases, the coffee thermoses, the clocks, the golf balls, towels and markers, the sponsorships, the sports memorabilia auctions.

And what about the NYLPI umbrellas that he handed out at the luncheon, and somehow he arranged for it to rain after the lunch, which created a great photo op of hundreds of NYLPI umbrellas leaving the Waldorf Astoria. And who can forget his puns at the luncheon. Every idea had only one ultimate purpose -- advance the mission of NYLPI.

And look at how he built NYLPI to be an even more powerful force for justice in disability rights, environmental justice, and access to health care. He attracted great talent and he developed great leaders within the organization. In an interview with the NY Law Journal last September, Michael talked about his strategy of recruiting and developing extraordinary advocates who are trained in litigation, legislative advocacy, organizing and media, and who work with directly-affected communities to achieve

positive changes in law and policy. How proud he was that several former NYLPI staff members are now executive directors of other nonprofit organizations doing wonderful work in their communities.

Executive directors in other social justice organizations in NYC and across the country talk about how Michael was always sharing his relationships and strategies to help them bump up their performance. Michael introduced Martha Bergmark of the Mississippi Center for Justice to Ken Feinberg. Thanks to Michael's kick start, 16 lawyers, working in a dozen Gulf Coast legal aid organizations, are now providing legal assistance to several thousand of the BP oil disaster's most vulnerable victims, so far securing more than \$9 million in claims payments.

He and a couple of colleagues created a two day retreat where 12-15 executive directors would come together every year to discuss the challenges they faced and share effective practices. Many of them are here today.

Zerline, I know the pain you and your three beautiful children, Brice, Garon, and Zaya, are in. Nothing we say, however eloquent or touching, can bring Michael back to us.

But you must know that we loved him with the deepest parts of our souls. We loved him because of who he was, what he cared about, how he conducted himself, how he helped those in desperate need.

We will miss his joshing and his sometimes awful punning, his persistence and his nagging, his vision and his commitment, and most of all his friendship.

I'd like to finish with a poem that I have slightly adapted:

So when we think about his life,  
We won't dwell upon its close;  
We'll remember all the good times,  
And forget about life's blows.

We'll remember all the happiness,  
The joy and not the tears;  
The assurance and the confidence,  
And not irrational fears.

Our lives have all been better,  
Because he has been there;  
So now we leave his memory,  
In God's all-loving care.

Good bye, Michael.

We will always love you.

And, yes, because you wanted me to, I will learn to love to say "NILPEE"!

## Will Carlin

Michael was my best friend for 25 years, but when I first met him, I didn't much like him. He had called me to play squash, and I had no idea who he was. Take out your programs and look at the back page and check him out in the picture in the lower right corner.

That's what he looked like when he showed up. Well, he wasn't wearing a silk bathrobe, but he had that long hair and a headband. I am pretty serious when I play squash, but Michael was just a chatterbox – he wouldn't stop talking. "Who is this guy?" I kept thinking to myself. After the match, I knew we wouldn't play again.

He later teased me that he couldn't believe how arrogant I was (he was right), but that he liked me anyway, and as he has done with so many of the people in this room, he drew me in.

Of course, we played again. And again. And over time, I somehow found myself included with his three oldest friends, all amazing men and each very special: John Lewis, Scott Schaefer, and James Klein.

My friendship with Michael has made me into a better man. He showed me the satisfaction of helping people less fortunate, he personified the example of doing the right thing, and more than anything else, he gave me the ability to laugh at myself.

I am guessing that nearly everyone here can tell a story where Michael used his wit, humor and sense of timing to completely defuse a situation. One quick story:

Two years ago, when NYLPI was a finalist for the New York Times Nonprofit Excellence award, the judges came to NYLPI for a presentation. If you win the award, you get to be a judge the following year. But when the presentation started, the executive director of the previous year's winner was not there. Ten minutes later, he walked in, apologizing for not being on time. Michael paused in his presentation, let the guy start to settle in and said with palpable mirth, "I bet you were on time last year."

Everyone burst out laughing and the ED immediately took the cue, and said: "Okay, where is my scorecard?" Needless to say, they became friends.

Two nights ago, I was on the phone with David Stern – one of Michael's close friends who already has become one of mine because of Michael – and we were talking about all the little things we both were missing already. I told him about playing squash almost every week for the past 25 years with Michael, and more often than not, taking a steam bath afterwards. After sitting in there for a while, we would get out and take ice cold showers that would take our breaths away and then run, naked and giggling back into the warmth of the steam room. I am going to miss that giggle.

So many of our best conversations took place in that steam room. One of the reasons, we have been so close is that our lives intersect on all three major areas: squash, work and family.

He talked about people most of all. Nearly everyone at NYLPI, including Marnie, Miranda, Isabel, Tanya and Gavin. He talked about close friends that I barely know in person but feel I know well: John Wright, Paul LaFortezza, Michael Stusser and Saiful Islam. He talked about mentors and friends like David Brodsky, Joan Vermeulen and John Siffert. He talked about people in legal services like Lillian Moy, Harvey Epstein, and Ken Rosenfeld. He talked about people in squash like Beth Rasin, Richard Chin, Tim

Wyant and Kevin Klipstein. And of course, he talked about his mother, Ellie, his father, Stanley, his brothers David and Seth. And every single member of the Goodman clan: Jack, Fritzzy, Merryl and Monty, Tria and Bill, Kael and Lisi and your children.

He talked about his special relationship with more of you than I can possibly mention here.

But there were four people he talked about most.

Brice: you are his first born, and he regularly bragged to me about your thoughtfulness, your similar slightly off-beat senses of humor, and how proud he was of the woman you still are becoming.

Garon: he saw so much of himself in you, from your love of numbers to the quickness of your mind and the way you think. Take out your programs again and look at the inside picture: that's Michael, but it might as well be Garon. He loved that you two were so alike.

Zaya: One of his favorite stories about you was when you were about four years old, and you were climbing on some furniture and he said, "Zaya, get down!" You looked at him and said, "I love you, Daddy." He laughed as he told the story and said that you had him wrapped around your fingers since the day you were born.

And Zerline: he really did regularly tell me how lucky he was that you two met, that you were the mother of his children, that you were his partner. Over 25 years, he regularly told me how surprised he was at how deeply in love the two of you still were.

Michael's death makes no sense to me. He leaves a hole in my life – and I know in so many of yours – that simply cannot and will not ever be filled.

Last year, the day after his birthday, we were talking on the phone late at night, and I knew I had to tell him something. After all the caveats that one straight man would say to another, I told him that I loved him.

His two word response would be the worst two words to hear if you had gotten the nerve to say "I love you" to your boyfriend or girlfriend for the first time, but it was the perfect response.

And I believe that they apply to so many of you who also loved him so intensely; I hope they give you a similar measure of solace that they do me.

He said simply, "I know."