

In a room of men he WAS the man

It's become cliché to use the phrase that someone is a "man's man". But Albert Harold Mages, our dad, Joy's big brother, grandfather, uncle and friend to us all was truly a man's man.

Pardon me now that this eulogy will not be chronological, but rather a stream of consciousness.

I want to start with an experience my dad and I shared in March of 2001. Shortly after our mom died, dad developed pneumonia and it was apparent that he needed assisted care living. The great folks here at The King Home felt he was not "healthy" enough for their independent living plan, so dad and I went to Orlando for a month. We went for several reasons. We went so he could enjoy the good weather and get stronger. We went so I could drill him with cognitive tests to improve his fading memory, and we went to get to know each other on a deeper level. We shared a hotel room at the Disney Sheraton and rented an SUV. From that base, we traveled all over Florida. We spent a day at Cape Canaveral, we spent several days in Tampa, we drove to Miami, and we even sat through one of those high pressure sales pitches to buy a time share so we could get free tickets to go to Disney World and rode every single ride for the next three days.

Every day we woke up early and went for a swim which he loved. Then we ate breakfast, spent an hour or two doing memory exercises, and then an hour or two on the treadmill or the stationary bike. After that we took off on our day. No matter what the day was like, dad was upbeat and friendly. I can honestly say that in 30 days we did not have a cross word, or even a small disagreement. I can say that it was painful for me to see how severe his cognitives were impaired and how valiantly he struggled to improve them against the monster that is Alzheimer's. But like the mule that he was, he worked and worked and damn if he didn't improve enough to get accepted for a trial stay here. After a couple of days the staff realized he was fit and fully capable of living an independent life, and for two years after that he even drove his car very safely.

So I need to thank The King Home for first rejecting my dad because it forced a trip that he and I needed to take. During that trip dad confessed something to me that he said had bothered and embarrassed him his whole adult life. He told me that he had "washed-out" of pilot school because a couple of red-necks had beaten him because he was a Jew the day before exams and the lack of sleep and pain caused him to lose concentration and so he never got to fly over Europe and never made Lieutenant. He was so despondent over the incident that he exaggerated his accomplishments in the Army and wanted me to know that he was not the man he pretended to be. Quite the contrary, I found all of this to be refreshing and made me feel more strongly that he was MORE than I ever thought he was. His confession was quite related to my having recently given him the book, The Greatest Generation which spurred his candor.

It is not trivial nor is it unfair to say that the world he left Friday is a world quite different from the one he was born into in 1924. In fact, the world we live in today was built by men like my dad and others I proudly see in this room. Tom Brokaw captured the essence of what these men did during their lives in his book "The Greatest Generation".

What Brokaw captures in *The Greatest Generation* magnificently is a testament to a nation and her people; He brings to life the extraordinary stories of a generation that gave new meaning to courage, sacrifice, and honor in many ways beyond the battles.

I would like to read a passage from his book that illustrates the kind of greatness I saw in my dad. "They came of age during the Great Depression and the Second World War and went on to build modern America -- men whose everyday lives of duty, honor, achievement, and courage gave us the world we have today." My real reason for telling this to you is to urge you to remind members of our generation who are still lucky enough to have one or both parents alive, to listen to their stories before they are lost forever.

I want to tell two stories that illustrate my dad's relationship to my brother and I as well as my mom. When I was 18 and a freshman at the University of Illinois in Champaign the phone rang one day. One of my roommates told me that my dad was on the phone. Immediately I asked him what was wrong with mom. Why did I ask that? He NEVER called me for any reason, so I assumed it was about my mom and he could not discuss it with my brother who was too young. Turned out she had breast cancer and she did wind up beating it, but I had to come home and tend to her because my dad so hated hospitals.

Twenty five years later when mom developed pancreatic cancer, my brother and I spent weeks in the hospital at her side. We rotated because her greatest fear was dying alone so we vowed that one of us would always hold her hand. At the very end, after two grueling weeks where Mike and I were fighting each other to not leave her side and my dad (averse to hospitals as he was) never once could enter the room, there came a knock on her hospice door. Wearing his best suit and with a fresh barber shave, there was our dad, the hero, the rock. He looked at Mike and me and said, "You guys look like shit. Go take a break, get a bite to eat; I need some time alone with mom. Two hours later, after 50 years of devotion and marriage, we got a call on Mike's cell phone while we were eating hamburgers at Johnny Rockets. Ruth had died in his arms.

I grew up eavesdropping on stories shared by my dad and my uncles and their Los Caballeros friends about what it meant to serve our country in times of war. I will never forget these men. I have tears in my eyes now, just writing about it. Perhaps like you, I was raised by men who rarely spoke of their sacrifice and heroism. Thank God they were there! Even more succinctly, I heard what it was like to serve THIS country as a Jew fighting Nazi Germany. Early in my life I understood that there was a certain irony in being a young man who wanted to fight Nazis being discriminated against by his own country for being a Jew.

My dad was not religious in the observant sense, nor was he a hero in the army sense. But he walked with God and he loved his country and serving his country was an honor

he took seriously and he expressed often to me his frustration that he could not have done more.

Military service was a source of great pride to my dad despite his confessions to me later in his life that promotions and challenges were not only denied him because of his Judaism, but that he literally had fights with other soldiers in his own unit over Judaism. Despite these obstacles, my dad did learn to fly in the army and he was honorably discharged as a sergeant in 1947. Was he a hero? To me as a kid he was. And he regaled us with pilot tales both military and civilian that may have been part fact and part fiction but were always fascinating.

In the 1960s when the war in Vietnam became the first TV war, my dad and I started to disagree about patriotic issues. My dad wanted me to enlist for the Vietnam War, and I wanted to understand the purpose of it. While I very much consider myself a product of the 60s generation, the fact is I never was drafted and never had to make the real decision to fight for this country, but I knew that if I got drafted for that war, I would not serve. Canada or even jail seemed preferable and my dad and I quietly stewed about this whenever he got home early enough to eat dinner with the evening news on TV.

So what is my point? I guess if I have one, it is that these men of that great generation also learned to adapt. While rebuilding America my dad learned to be open to the notion that war for war's sake was not a good thing and that he and I could become friends and I could learn valuable life lessons from him, some of which even came from military discipline.

I watched my dad get up and go to work at 5 AM every morning and often not get home until midnight. He built a business (Sharel Interiors) with my mother that has been in existence for 55 years. He hired hundreds of people and served tens of thousands. Informally I would like to see a show of hands from everyone in this room who has or had something built or fixed for them by my dad. I know it is permanent. He even built his own house in 1956 and by any standard that house today is still modern. Even here at The King Home on the fifth floor, for as long as this great place exists there will be cornices on the windows built in the woodshop in this basement and hung by this remarkable man. This astonishing man who could tell you how many square inches there are in this very room by taking a glance around and calculating the space by counting ceiling tiles, or columns, knowing the standard sizes and running all the math in his head.

But what about that head? Look around you at the photos of this man. His head was our gift. He had a smile that jumps off the pictures and still lights up this room. He had blue eyes that penetrated your soul. He had a sweet wonderful laugh that he shared frequently and the shoulders attached to his beautiful head were broad and comforted so many of us.

How ironic that his head turned out to be the piece that betrayed his "always ready to arm wrestle" barrel-chested body, a body so toned and steely that it took eight strong people to restrain him just a couple of weeks ago when his dementia would not allow him to rest. How cruel that in his last years it was that fabulous calculator that he carried in his head

that failed him. Yet he defied all the odds and fought off this heinous disease by diffusing it with humor and tricks. He would post notes all over his room to remind himself of things his short-term calculator could no longer remember, and amazingly few people in the circle of thousands he knew realized how bad his measurable cognitives had gotten.

This man who in thousands of games I never once beat in checkers and could only beat in chess after he had dementia was really a genius. You could easily underestimate my dad and I think he liked it that way. It made him a dangerous poker player, and an awesome entrepreneur. His gift of genius made him a navigator, a pioneer, an innovator, and a sturdy competitor. My brother and I may have inherited some of these qualities from him genetically, but more likely we got them by watching him in awe as he climbed a ladder with a mouth full of drapery hooks or screws poking through his cheeks and spat them onto a wall and hammered them in like a machine. "Better than a machine" he told me.

When I was 13, the summer past my bar mitzvah, I wanted a single reflex camera. My dad's beloved cousin Al Zoot sold them for a living and made my dad an offer on a Miranda camera. I would go to bed dreaming about that camera and my dad said if I worked for him for the whole summer he would pay me \$5/day and that would get me the Miranda. So every morning I awoke at 5 AM, got into his cigar stinking truck, and off we went. Breakfasts at the same diner, then to his store to fill orders and load his truck with drapes, and furniture, and finally around 9 AM off to make deliveries. I was exhausted after coming home at 8 or 10 PM six days a week, but I sure learned the difference between a Phillips and a flat head screw driver, yet I couldn't pin a row of drapes in twice the time he could. But I survived that summer, and learned several things: 1. I did NOT want his business, 2. I would go to college, 3. that camera was even sweeter because I worked so hard for it.

And he expected us to read his mind. He would climb a ladder with that full mouth of screws and grunt toward his toolbox and you could feel like an idiot for not knowing if he wanted his screwdriver or his hammer, his pliers or his wrench. It was that way if he was hanging shutters or rebuilding an antique car. Once he took a 1939 Packard that was in a scrap yard and spent a summer turning it into a gorgeous new car, screw by screw, bondo by bondo. And when it was glistening and finished, he took me behind the former Old Orchard theaters and at age 14 taught me how to drive. Not just drive, but drive a three on the tree standard stick. And when I jammed it into the wrong gear and busted the gearbox, he did not stay mad at me for more than a second, in fact, out came the tools, and there, behind the theater I learned to build a transmission. Ultimately he donated that car to channel 11 and they auctioned it for 15K when that was a lot of money.

Speaking of cars, I must tell you about my 11th birthday in 1967. A series of record-breaking storms battered the west coast of Lake Michigan, hitting Chicago the hardest, shutting nearly everything down. Looting of unattended stores became rampant, and it took the city over two weeks to clear the major highways and roads. During the height of that storm, my dad grabbed four chains and wound them around the tires of his yellow Chevy Impala convertible, piled eight kids and my mother into that car, and drove all ten

of us to Hackney's in two feet of snow. We were the only patrons, and I remember that birthday with a fondness and pride that warms me even on the coldest snowiest day still.

While I am on a roll (pardon the pun) I need to tell you about a road trip we took in his Dodge Charger with his mom, my grandma. He bought that car in 1969. It was the classic Charger with dual carburetors and a 360 horsepower V-8. The car was all engine, zero leg-room, but my mom, my brother, my grandmother and dad and I got in that car and headed for California. The trip was for three weeks and it was memorable for more reasons than I have time to retell, but in particular there was one night that needs retelling. He insisted at one point on the trip to drive 24 hours without sleep. He had no idea how cramped and sweaty and carsick we all were from the speed he was driving, the inability we all had to sleep, and terror we sometimes felt as he pushed the speedometer routinely past 140 mph. Finally he grudgingly agreed to stop at a Holiday Inn somewhere in Clearfart, North Dakota.

We were fighting each other to see who could get out of the car first. Of course we got one room for the five of us. A roll-away was brought in for my grandma and Mike and I shared a double bed. After a couple hours of lights out, a snoring that was the labor of a man who had driven 24 hours sleepless and was exhausted began to permeate the room. The low rumble escalated into crescendo of snorts and vibratos that made sleeping impossible. Soon my brother and I decided to go in the bathroom and sleep in the tub. We took our pillows and crammed in, but we realized it was still just as loud and more uncomfortable. Then we heard our mom, "Albert, Albert, turn over." The snoring continued. Then mom nearly shouting, Albert, YOU MUST TURN OVER." And then we heard him, "God dammit Ruth, stop poking me I AM awake."

Maybe it was the overtiredness, and maybe it was the goofiness of our family, but when my brother and I realized it was our grandmother snoring we laughed so hard we nearly suffocated, and soon my mom and dad were laughing as hard as we were. This went on seemingly for hours.

Remember my description of my dad's infamous truck? Aside from the clutter that made perfect sense only to him, there was that lingering stench of cigar smoke. Well, the stench grew on me, and when I was 17 my dad taught me how to smoke a cigar. You would be surprised how many nuances go into making a great cigar and how important technique is to enjoying one properly. I will smoke one today in his memory as we did together on his 80th birthday just six short months ago.

If I look decent today, thank my wife for the clothes, but thank my dad and his dad, my papa Izzy for the shave. From them I learned that nothing beats stress and the day to day grind like the expert strokes from a freshly stropped straight edge razor after the application of multiple hot towels. This is one luxury I routinely spoil myself with, and it will always fill me with joy and fond memories whenever I get one like this morning.

The greatest thing about having kids of my own is that I get to learn every day how hard it is to be a good parent and how easy it is to criticize your own parents. What I got from

having Kent and Kirby and later by watching my dad with Danielle and Mitchell was what kind of parent he could have been if he wasn't working so hard. Once he slowed down and even retired, I got to live vicariously through these kids who got not only the life lessons from my dad that he handed down to Mike and I, but also the warm hugs and sloppy kisses that we did not get. My dad actually got almost mushy as a grandfather and stopped the guarded tough guy stuff. He became Marlon Brando as the godfather stuffing orange slices in his mouth and running through the garden pretending to be a scary monster. It was a great gift to see.

My dad was also a prolific writer and quite good at it. When he applied to reside here at The King Home the application asked for a brief bio and he wrote an elegant nine page hand written piece that though marred by his already creeping dementia was literate and lovely. I will copy it and put it on my web site next week.

I need to mention a remarkable event in his life because it demonstrates almost everything about Al Mages in one story. As you all know, my dad loved to fish. He especially liked to fire up his speedboat that he retrofitted as a troller and go way out into Lake Michigan with a friend. In 1976 he and my brother's best friend who was all of 13 at the time left the Evanston pier at 6 AM. They had promised to be home by 4 in the afternoon since my mom and dad had plans that evening. Around 6 PM I got a call in my apartment in Champaign from my mother panicked that my dad had not come home. She called the coast guard and to make this long story short, the boat had gotten swamped by a wave early in the day and flipped over 11 miles out in the Lake. If you've never been 11 miles out in the Lake you need to take my word for this, it is no different than the ocean in that there is no land in sight.

Why does this story sum dad up? Because he was crazy enough to take the wrong kind of boat that far out into a very dangerous Lake with a kid. Because once the disaster hit, he had the presence of mind to keep that kid from his natural urge to try and swim to shore (which was a certain death) and held him as they stood on the capsized boat, heads barely above the water 9 hours before a passing boat saved them from darkness. But true to my parent's style they turned the event into a party and the book of photos is on the table. A week later after the party he was out again in that same boat after having it towed to shore by the Coast Guard and restoring it.

For the past five years my dad participated in a clinical trial for the AMA on medicines that are being tested for Alzheimer's. The study was very rigorous and the admission test was arduous. In fact, the first one he took, he did too well to be considered for the study. I had to coach him to dumb down a couple answers so he got accepted the second time we went. We went every three months, and he was subjected to repetitive cognitive tests and thorough physical exams. The great thing was that the AMA paid for the care he got, the bad part was, the test was double blind so we never knew if he got the experimental drugs or a placebo. When I questioned him about that paradox his answer up until his last visit in November was always the same, "I don't do this for myself, I do this for you and your kids and anybody else that can benefit. I'm happy to let them poke and prod if

one person benefits. Only a hero can utter such words in the throws of such a horrid disease.

Finally, I guess this is really all about dignity. The dignity my dad showed in his life, he showed in dying. I got to know my dad well at the end of his life when we both had time to listen to one another. I was astounded at the breadth of his knowledge and thirst for learning about my inventions. I also was so pleased that he learned to love this magical place, The King Home, like he loved my mother. I have not said much about my mother because it was painful for my dad to talk about her and it is painful for me still to write about her, but their lives were intertwined in ways few married people's are. They worked together, traveled the world together, built a home together, and for better and worse, raised my brother and me. Go be with your Ruth.

One last anecdote. There was a period in my younger life when I knew how to, and enjoyed having a few cocktails. On a vacation we took to Jamaica when I was 15 the airline was serving fruity spiked punch, and from Chicago to Montego Bay my dad kept slipping me drinks. By the time the plane landed I could not even walk to the taxi. All I remember was heaving from the balcony of the sixth floor room we had and sleeping for a day, awakening with the first of many hangovers I would have in my life. But I did learn to drink without feeling sneaky about it, I learned how to not drink too much, and I learned that my dad loved Jack Daniels. So my brother and I talked it over and decided at the end of this eulogy you will find bottles of Jack on the table. Please pour yourself a tad and make the following toast Al did, "I have lived my life, and it has been a good one."

My dad's legacy will be his kindness and willingness to be a friend. If I haven't mentioned you by name, please take no offense. My head is full of stories about each of you and I encourage any of you to log on to the Chicago Tribune's website and leave a note about my dad in the obituary section. We would enjoy reading your stories.

He was loyal beyond words in my vocabulary and had strength that was physical and mental. He was more than a rock, he was our boulder and only my brother and I can have the good fortune of having had him as our father. We learned to work hard and be honest. We learned how to make money, but more importantly how to make friends. We learned to take time to smell the roses and raise hell. We are better husbands, fathers, and friends because of him.

As I kissed my father's forehead for the last time Friday, ran my fingers through his still surprisingly thick soft hair and grasped his gnarled firm hands, I felt his strong gentleness and it reminded me once and forever how very fortunate we all were to know this man amongst men, and how anxious yet patient the lord must have been to have him by his side to permanently fix anything broken, maybe even the world.