

Eulogy for Frank Defilippis

By Leonardo Defilippis



As the scripture says, in honor of our dearest Father: “Well done good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of Our Lord!” This is the reality of his life and death, as God has taken him to his true homeland in heaven. His precious names of Frank, Frankie, Franco, Uncle Frank, Dad, Grandpa, Mr. D and Coach have many emotions for each and every one of us here.

I am Len, Leonard, Leonardo, the oldest son of Frank Defilippis and on behalf of my mother June, my brother Jimmy, Sisters Cathy, Janice and Amy and his two beloved and devoted sisters Helen and Alice, we want to thank all of you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to be here in this holy place. We are grateful for your effort to honor and show respect to this great man who lived and died among us, and who is certainly to many, a legend in the Napa Valley and beyond, in our

nation. His memory in our hearts and minds is not so much because of his greatness, but in his simple goodness that touched and shaped each of our lives. Even though we all remember him so well as this “character,” (and the stories are endless) with all his humor, wit or his strictness, he has passed on a legacy of values and lessons for generations to come. He was chosen by God Himself to be a light set on a hill.

There are two actions of my Dad that I would like to reflect upon with you that are symbolic of this humble, enduring spirit who has passed before us:

- A. Watering the Garden
- B. Running the Race

Watering the Garden: My Dad loved his garden. In fact, it was his place of solace and refuge his entire life, be it after a long day of work as a meat cutter or store supervisor, or coaching, and then into the sunset years of his remaining days. He would have preferred to have been

outside in his backyard all the time. In fact, it was the largest and prettiest room in the house for him. He cared little for material comforts.

Life starts in the Garden as it did in creation, and it ends in the Garden at our death. My Dad was a very good gardener. He planted the seeds and starts, and he watered and he watered and he watered again. He produced a harvest not only for our family, but for others, he so generously gave as well. Jesus proclaims that you will know them by their fruit. And indeed his was good fruit. Abundant and life- giving was this opportunity that God gave him in His garden, the garden of life.

The First Fruits of this garden were to be found in the bosom of his family and childhood. His mother and father, Noni and Pa, as they were so affectionately called, gave him this enduring love and loyalty to family. Noni, his mother, was very religious; she was the saint in the family. Pa gave him that ethic for work and perseverance and he was indeed, a character just like my father, even more so. The apple does not fall far from the tree!

In the early years they spoke no English, only Italian, for their ancestry comes from the Italian province of Ticino in Switzerland. He loved his siblings and adored his older brothers, as his mentors in life. They lived during the great depression, which is hard for so many of us to even comprehend, to fathom the sacrifices that had to be encountered. His father Pa would say the now famous line: "If you find it on the road, bring it home." Road kill was never beyond this family. In addition, as the family grew through all the marriages, many children were born. He loved each and every one of his nephews and nieces as Uncle Frank and this formed his own life to always love children.

Then entering into this garden, came the harvest of his long-lasting friendships and community life in the Valley! He planted and watered this seed also. He loved his friends: the Rutherford gang, those friends from St. Helena, Napa and beyond. None of us can forget the story of his friend, Al Del Bondio of Rutherford, saving his life as a young man in the hills of Napa Valley. They were hunting in the heights of Mount St. John, in the hills near Rutherford, when my father slipped, and held on to a tree branch sticking out of the cliff. As Frank dangled with



hundreds of feet below him, awaiting an instant death, his friend Al, with superhuman strength, pulled him up with his own weight. A life had been saved.

Then there was the horrific World War II. The mysterious fruit of overwhelming suffering was to also be a part of this garden.



As a boy of just 18 years in October of 1944, he was sent to defend his country from evil in the Pacific front! As a soldier in the Army's 77th Infantry Division, he experienced combat in Japan in the famous battle of Okinawa. Most of his comrades were wiped out. More people died during the Battle of Okinawa than all those killed as a result of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was the bloodiest battle in the Pacific. In addition to three amphibious landings in Japan, Frank was pinned down for 10 days, in a fox hole, in the coral shore. He met the enemy face-to-face in combat during the day and in the darkness of the night. The stories are not fables, but the reality of war. God protected him for another day.

After the war ended and the invasion of Japan was avoided, thus saving a million US soldiers lives, this soldier showed the honor of a true soldier. Demonstrating he was a human being, made in the image and likeness of God, Frank befriended a French priest who was serving his flock in Japan. The French priest begged Frank to help him provide food to an orphanage of starving Japanese children. The war had left all of them destitute. He had to sneak the food to get it to these poor people. He was able to fill an entire army vehicle to help save these poor ones. Those who tried to kill him, which included not just the Japanese military but women and children, he was now trying to save. This was the fruit of this garden of his life, to now bring healing and compassion to *all* of God's children. Imagine, a man who could heal the moment, only by the grace of God. And he knew that. Our faith kept him sane and alive.

When the interrupted athlete returned home after the war, he resumed his love for sports for which he had such a talent. He was an athlete like so many in this Valley. He excelled in basketball, baseball, track, and he instilled in his teammates, courage and solidarity. And those friendships endured and were fostered for decades.

Then came a great joy in this garden: he was to begin the harvest of his marriage to June Toreson, a city girl from San Francisco. Little did she know of the life she was about to enter. A young girl's trip to the country, to the Calistoga Fair, she was to encounter the young Frank Defilippis, and her life was to change forever. She entered into a crazy, Italian family and what was to become the fruit of this garden: a marriage that was to blossom and last for 59 years this September. His marriage was to be the fertile soil of this garden.

In the flower bed of the family he was a devoted father to every child - all six of them, which also includes our baby sister, Diane, who died back in 1961. Through the years, twelve grandchildren arrived, who loved him so much. This reminds me of the first encounter Dad had with his first grandchild. My wife, Patti and I, took Clara our first- born, who was only four months old to a track



meet in Eugene, Oregon. We waited at the hotel, where he arrived very late that day. When he met us, he looked at baby Clara, and declared, "Oh, Clara, this is your Uncle Frank." He had to now transition from the beloved Uncle to the beloved Grandfather. And for twenty years, new flowers of grandchildren were to arrive in his garden.

One also cannot forget the neighborhood! He was devoted to his neighbors and loved every one of them. He showed us the way to love them and care for them, and he even fed them through his own garden. The Defilippis home became the focal point of Valley Glenn Lane. He was always visiting the sick and the dying too. I remember this from my earliest days as a child.

He also planted the seeds of goodness in the workplace. As a butcher, and then eventually as a store supervisor, he worked so hard and was so loyal to his employers and to his employees. He even sacrificed his body for his physically demanding work. Moreover, in the early years, he never took vacations. He used his free time to earn extra income for his family, budding the vineyards of many of the fertile valleys in Northern California. He set an example which became a beacon for many.

The harvest of his years in sports are so well known and documented, that he was not just known locally, but known around the nation. The seeds he planted through his years as a coach have been so evident, even during this process of his dying. The parents and athletes have given tribute to him, weeping like children before him as he lay sick. As I noticed at last night's vigil, grown men were overwhelmed with emotion and unable to speak. His fruit was truly abundant. What wonderful athletes he coached - men and women, young and old.

Dad loved the Napa Valley and all the aspects of this community. He established so many programs, assisted so many people in a variety of ways, and reached out to so many groups. We, in the family, to this day, do not even know the full extent of his activities.

Lastly, but most importantly, he loved the Church. Christ and His Blessed Mother were a large part of who Frank was. He kept an image of the Sacred Heart in his wallet since high school. It was with him in every battle in the Pacific. It was with him in his room, placed over his own heart, when he gave his last breath.

His love for the Sacraments was so evident. He was devoted to Mass and to Confession. This set an example not just for me personally, but for many others. This tough coach was never afraid to say the Rosary; he was never ashamed of his Faith. He knew who he was and what he must do.

The other reflection of Dad which is so symbolic and appropriate is: **Running the Race**. He ran the race himself and he ran the race for others, even for those who were too weak to run. He was *the athlete* and *the coach* at the same time.

As it says in 1 Corinthians, *"Do you not know those who run in a race, all indeed run, but one receives the prize? So run as to obtain it. And everyone in a contest abstains from all things – and they indeed to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. I, therefore, so run as not without a purpose: I so fight as not beating the air; but I chastise my body and bring it into subjection -to win the race!"*

In Hebrews it states: *"Since we are surrounded by a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down. Run in such a way as to get the prize,*



looking towards the author and finisher of faith, Jesus, who for the joy set before him, endured a cross."

Let us reflect briefly on the coaching side of Mr. D so as to ponder this thought of running the race: As one of his cherished athletes summed up before he died:

"You taught me perseverance. You believed in me Mr. D, at a time when a lot of the world was



chaotic. You were a constant source that brightened my day. Thank you for giving all that to us unselfishly, for teaching us to give. I love you."

Mr. D, however, was very direct and always had an opinion. And his opinions were usually right. As he

would say to his son-in-law, Giovanni from Italy, as he was running through the streets of Browns Valley or even on the track at Justin-Siena during a practice when he was visiting from Florence in the summers: "Giovanni, with running, you do everything wrong. You run like an Italian!" And Giovanni would always reply, "I am an Italian!"

Coach D was a great athlete himself and he was competitive with the best of them. He learned the same lessons that he was to pass on to others. One cannot just achieve something; one must sacrifice and earn it.

In the very early history of St. Apollinaris, or "St. A's," when sports and exercise were non-existent, he would go on his lunch break to the school, during a rigorous schedule at the meat department. He would stand on the asphalt playground in front of the school, and make the entire school exercise - with jumping jacks, push ups and running exercises. This was the seed of the sports program he was to establish. In fact, this was the growing vine that was to evolve into the Napa Track Club, which we know today.

He coached two teams in basketball at a time for over a decade. Many of his teams were state champions. He established the CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) league here in the Napa Valley, which nurtured so many future athletes.

Perhaps one would be surprised to learn that he was also involved in the Napa Swim Club for years, in which every one of his own kids excelled. Even back then, Mr. D could be seen with his stopwatch around his neck. He was always timing everyone!

Of all the sports in his life, his main focus was the Napa Track Club. He immersed himself in this work. He knew all the track and field events and could coach them all. He became unique in

the national coaching scene. At times, coaches from all over the country would seek him out for information about this athlete or that. He became like a magnet.

One story that is so symbolic of Mr. D was during a track meet, under the typical, hot sun. He roamed the field, always looking around at all the events and on the progress of his athletes. In one case, he looked out in the distance and saw one of his athletes pole vaulting. He failed miserably at his attempt. Then Mr. D, with a voice that rang out through the whole event, shouted out "**HIGHER.**" On the next try, the boy cleared the pole and Mr. D showed his approval. The kids just loved him and respected him.



At Justin-Siena High School, he re-established the track team. I was a member of the original track club in 1967, with only four guys. In a very brief time, Mr. D made the track program a force to be reckoned with. He would be seen at Justin-Siena's track every day. He not only loved the students, but all of the teachers and the administration. Where did this man get his energy, despite his last

thirty years of medical hardships and sufferings? People were amazed by his dedication, day in, day out.

He not only had a national presence, but an international one as well. I can still remember when he took his team to Belfast, Ireland, and served as a goodwill ambassador for the sport. In a word, he had no boundaries. He did not distinguish between rich or poor, black or white. He was a coach, a mentor, a father. He could draw talent out of anyone.

Frank also respected the media, and they respected him. The sports world could see real talent and wisdom in this coach and they loved him for it. He wasn't like many of the controversial coaches and athletes that we see today, spoiled by money and fame. This was the real McCoy. He was a man dedicated to sports for the development of the whole person. It was genuine. It was selfless and not self-seeking. That was Mr. D.

He coached to the final days until collapsing in my mother's arms. He has been called one of the oldest coaches in America, and there are few to dispute that. The devotion he showed to the sport and to his athletes is hard for any of us to fully comprehend.

Lastly, we come to his **Final Race**.

His body was giving out more and more, and he discovered the power of prayer, the power of the Rosary, and began to offer up his own suffering for others. Many prayers were answered! Those with troubles with the law, drugs, alcohol, people in prison - he was always there for them. He would sit out in his garden every day and pray for a growing list of well over a hundred requests that came to him. The requests never stopped coming in, once they witnessed this grace given to my father.

Yet there existed a quality of detachment for the real race of life, the one that he was about to enter. In the last two months, before he died, things changed. He began focusing on a different race to win! To see God himself! He slowly had no interest in sports. It was awkward for many who came to visit him, but he was teaching all of us a new hurdle to cross, a new high bar to jump, a new record to break. The words of his prayers became real. And it was profound and mysterious. This is a lesson to be learned when we too are chosen to pass to the next life.

In the final days, I remember what has been described as the night of crosses. One night, we kept vigil at his bedside. My wife started to say the Rosary with him and he quietly, began making the sign of the cross, he did this during my mother's turn, my sister's, and during my stay with him. It stirred our hearts and moved us to tears. Finally, my brother Jimmy took his turn, and he continued making the sign of the cross in his sleepy torpor. Then, he gently kissed



the hand of my brother. He was passing the baton in the relay. He was showing us the way. In his very weakness and suffering, he was becoming a prophet. He exemplified the reality of what the Church is and should always be – it was the power of love itself.

So, my dear family and friends, let us never forget my Dad, but sincerely pray for his soul and pray to him for your intentions. He is now serving us from the other side.

“I have fought the fight, I have finished the race, and I have kept the faith.”

As he said every day at grace before meals, let us all pray together: “May the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen. “



Frank and June Defilippis