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Current Issue

Kevin Allen: In Memoriam

Some called him Mr. Fundraiser. Others referred to him as The Boss. But the man from Bronxville, New York who elevated the act of fundraising to an art form, was also a loving father, supportive brother, devoted friend and generous soul right to the very end. Kevin M. Allen, son of the late Joseph Patrick and Nellie Jane Allen, died on Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008 at the age of 54. Brother of John Patrick, Michael Allen, Jennifer D'Auria and the late Joseph Allen, Kevin is also survived by his sons Robert, Patrick and Stephen Allen.

Passionately driven

Though he left the world too early, Kevin's larger-than-life existence ensured those fifty-four years were filled with dedication, hard work and endless passion. In fact, it was passion that lay at his very core, spurring him forward in his every inspired step. Similarly, as far back as anyone can remember, Kevin was driven. Driven by life, by circumstance, by the desire for bigger, better and to be fully engaged in whatever activity he pursued, be it flying, scuba diving, golfing, fundraising— or his quest to be James Bond.

"We would often pretend to be spies," recalls brother Michael Allen of their fondness for 007. That ambitious goal, he adds, may explain why Kevin got his pilot's license before even attaining a driver's permit. Or, perhaps the decision stemmed from his enthrallment with NASA's race to the moon, muses Charles Birdie, a childhood pal. What we know for sure is Kevin wanted to fly. And, so, he did. "He made decisions quickly and stuck to them," adds Charles. Nothing could stop him – not even the skies above.

In the same vein, Kevin Allen was never one to be satisfied with 'good enough'. He lived big, he lived profoundly, with a zest for life and adventure unparalleled. Flying planes was one thing, but jumping from them made it into his repertoire as well. And let's not forget scuba diving or his fascination with golf. "He always tried to be the best he can be," says Michael. "He was actually frustrated that he couldn't be a scratch golfer."

Family ties

With four brothers and one sister, Kevin Allen grew up in a full and busy home. As the eldest, it's possible he felt a need to protect and care for his siblings, Michael surmises. But whatever the reason, "he was always in a hurry to grow up." Four boys also ensured the house was an active and competitive one. Whether wrestling, playing football or the NFL strategy game, Kevin was always on top of his and any brother had to work hard to keep up. But Kevin also introduced his siblings to the finer things in life. Finer, that is, for young boys growing up in the fifties and early sixties. Star Trek, the Beatles, I Spy and the ever-popular Rat Patrol were celebrated in the Allen household thanks to the clan's senior son.

Kevin's strong sense of family and kinship extended to the role he later played as father. Though it wasn't always easy, Kevin tried hard to emulate the loving relationship he enjoyed with his own dad before the senior Allen passed away—also at the age of 54. And, at times, he even succeeded. "When my parents were together, I remember my dad was an extremely loving and affectionate dad," says son Patrick. "He was always asking for hugs and kisses and wanted to cuddle up with my brother when we were very young," he adds. "He made sure that we knew he loved us."

He also made sure his children were strong, able and self-reliant. Patrick recalls fondly the advice his father gave him in the summer of 1993 upon telling him he had been harassed by some bullies at school: "Try your best to handle it [a fight] without fighting but if you think there is a chance that it might get physical, you throw the first punch." Be proactive, instead of reactive was Kevin's underlying message, says Patrick. "Avoid trouble but don't ever take any shit from anybody."

A serious work ethic

And that's a message he took to heart in his own life too. For, Kevin lived life intensely. "Even at 16 years old I remember thinking Kevin is the most serious kid I know," recalls Charles. While working together at the local ice cream store that summer Charles was busy being a teenager, more interested in talking to the girls who walked through the door than in the particulars of his job. But not Kevin. His focus was set strictly on learning the books, scheduling and store procedures. So, it came as no surprise when the following summer Kevin moved up to the role of assistant manager.

And that strong commitment to work followed him throughout his lifetime. "He always wanted to make money, to be successful," offers Michael. But he also had immense responsibility. For, at the young age of 17, Kevin was already a husband and a father. And so, whether due to obligation or a burgeoning work ethic, that summer he worked three jobs at once. "He would open the ice cream store at 10 a.m., work at a deli from 3 to 7 p.m. and bartend at a local pub from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m.," remembers Michael."

Soon thereafter, the man with a penchant for hard work came to find his true calling: fundraising. Kevin's passion for the industry would eventually personify him, motivate and captivate him, for many years to come. He really hit his stride when he took a job with Community Counseling Services. Within a couple of years, Kevin had already moved into the executive ranks and, not long after, he was asked to take on the role of Vice President of the company's Canadian operations based out of Toronto.

In 1981 he encouraged Charles to join the company with the words: "learn this business and in seven years we will open up our own firm," his old friend reminisces. It was while working under Kevin's tutelage for two years in Canada that Charles saw firsthand his workaholic tendencies. "He worked long and hard but god was he good," he says of the time. "He could convince a hostile audience in a matter of minutes to champion a fundraising cause."

The king of fundraising

By 1988, Kevin had elevated CCS to the largest fundraising firm in Canada and the second most profitable division in CCS overall. And, with his skills and experience firmly grounded, Kevin decided to start his own firm, Navion, immediately calling his old friend and former employee to join in the new venture. "I thought he was crazy but the guy was so convincing I had to say 'yes,'" Charles recalls. Sure enough, within 18 months Navion surpassed CCS as the largest fundraising firm in Canada. No small feat. Seemingly impossible, in fact, but Kevin had a special knack for pitching and winning proposals as well as the subtle— and not-so-subtle— act of persuasion.

Case in point: While working on a campaign for the theology college at the University of Toronto, Charles and Kevin set up a meeting with the Bishop of Hamilton to gain his assistance in their efforts. Suffice it to say, Kevin had already cemented his reputation with the Bishop while working on a national Anglican campaign several years prior. But, unaware that Kevin was joining in the discussion, upon seeing him sitting there, the Bishop declared wistfully, "Oh I see you brought the man with the silver tongue; I might as well say yes now to whatever you ask." Such was the stature that Kevin carried with him always.

To the point

Kevin was also renowned for his straightforward and direct manner. "He called a spade a spade," explains Shirlene Courtis, a former employee at CCS who worked under Kevin's supervision. "He didn't try to pretend things were rosy when they weren't." His younger brother agrees. "People always knew where they stood with Kevin, good bad or indifferent; there was no mystery," Michael says. He was a brash New Yorker with a lot of energy, Shirlene adds, explaining that Kevin's mannerisms weren't exactly what Canadians were used to at that point in time. "Kevin came to Canada and brought in the American model of fundraising," echoes friend and former colleague, George Stanois. And his fundraising finesse, mixed with his forthright, tough approach was an uncompromising model of success, bringing competitors from near and far to their knees. "He really made a mark on fundraising in Canada in the eighties," confirms George.

A leader, a mentor

Moreover, the high expectations Kevin placed on himself were mirrored in those he attributed to his employees. He was a taskmaster, a perfectionist, and demanding, at times, fiercely so. But he was also incredibly supportive and generous, taking on the role of teacher and friend to those who called him boss. "I learned so much from him," says Shirlene. "I knew I had such an excellent training ground and that helped make fundraising my chosen profession," she explains. "He was my mentor in fundraising and in life," says George. "I learned everything from him," he adds, recalling how, years later, he successfully emerged from a challenging situation by asking himself four simple words: what would Kevin do?

A big heart, a bright mind

But Kevin's influence and generosity extended well beyond the corner office. "One of the things I remember the most about my father was that he had a huge heart; he often went out of his way to help people whenever he had an opportunity," says Patrick. "I think this

was the reason that he got into fundraising for nonprofit organizations, he found helping others tremendously satisfying.” He was also munificent with his own money, giving what he could to family members or friends in need. In fact, when Michael was enrolled at university, Kevin provided him with some financial assistance to help pay for it. “I couldn’t have done it otherwise,” Michael says.

A bright perpetual student, Kevin was a voracious reader till the very end, soaking up as much information as he could, whether from books or the internet. He was also a raconteur, a storyteller and an extrovert who enjoyed telling jokes, entertaining others and being the centre of attention. And how could he not be. “He would come in a room and command a presence, just take over,” recalls Michael. Even today, months after his passing, Kevin’s presence is still felt by all who’ve made his acquaintance. His strength, voracious work ethic, fundraising acumen, warmth, sense of humour and generous heart have touched us all. Therein lies the legacy of the man with the silver tongue.