

Eulogy for Steven L. Nock
Delivered at his Memorial Service
January 26, 2008
Old Cabell Hall
University of Virginia
by
Paul W. Kingston

Let me introduce myself, I'm Paul Kingston. For 26 years, 5 days a week Steve and I ate lunch together, precisely at 12:00 noon. I'm deeply honored --- and pretty scared -- that Daphne has asked me to say a few words about him.

The first thing I want to say is that Steve was one of the luckiest guys in the world. He knew that better than anyone else. You see, he was married to Daphne. She loved him with all her heart and supported him in everything. They had a marriage of pure love -- they brought joy to each other.

One of the best marks of a man is the number of lives he touches for the good. Looking out at all of you here today, it's obvious that Steve had the richest of lives. Your presence attests to his remarkable connection to others.

It is very fitting the Virginia Consort sang so beautifully for us today. For many years Steve lent his voice to this group, often in this very spot. Music was in his soul. As Joan Snapp reminded me, Steve loved to say, "I don't sing because I'm happy; I'm happy because I sing." One of his high school friends just wrote, "He lived his life musically, creating beautiful and lasting melodies." Those words are just so true.

To preserve the dignity of this service, though, I'll skip over his life as a rock and roller.

The reason this is so tough for me is Steve was the best friend I ever had; I loved him dearly. I'll always be proud that I could call him my great friend.

I am proud because he was so good-spirited and passionate, because he was so kind and charitable, because he was so smart, inquisitive and interesting. You couldn't want more from a friend.

But, more than a friend, Steve was my hero. If I had said this to him, he would have just mocked me, "You're pathetic!"

But to me and others, he truly was heroic. He had zest for life and never-stop energy. Every day you could see his commitment to others.

In order to pull this off, he had to be unimaginably brave and tough. He was, by far, the toughest guy I've ever known. Everyday he faced pain, everyday he was heavily medicated, and everyday he knew that his life would be short despite the best efforts and care of so many talented doctors and nurses.

Who else faced circumstances like these and still grabbed life so fully? If you told him this, all he'd say was, "What else can you do?"

In the last week lots of people have come up to me and said something like, "I'm shocked. I had no idea that Steve had these problems." That's exactly what he intended. He never used his poor health as an excuse, and he never wanted people to feel sorry for him. So when people asked him how he was, all they heard was "Fine, fine. How are you doing?" If you wanted to find out about his health, Steve was a very unreliable source.

Steve's stories also had their reliability issues. He was a gifted storyteller in the Southern tradition. He knew that good stories should never be rushed, and that the long build up was as important as the punch line.

Most importantly he knew that facts should never be allowed to get in the way of Truth, capital T, or humor -- especially if exaggeration served his purpose. And perhaps the best part of these stories was that no one laughed louder than Steve. You couldn't resist laughing with him.

If you knew Steve at all, you could cite example after example of kindness and charity. Countless students benefited by his patient attention to their emotional lives.

He reached out to families whose kid was about to have an organ transplant. He warmly comforted those who had losses in their family. He was a long-time board member of our United Way, often contributing his sociological expertise to its efforts. The list goes on and on. But what's impressive to me is that he went beyond that bumper sticker, Perform Random Acts of Kindness. He lived a whole life of kindness.

Steve brought his passion to the scholarly life. A Commonwealth Professor at the University, he was a highly distinguished sociologist, specializing in the study of the family. All together, he published 86 articles and 7 books. This work engaged important issues, it was methodologically rigorous, and it often broke new ground. If his research supported views that were unpopular in our field, he never backed away. As the true scientist, he called it as he saw it.

Paul Amato, a very distinguished sociologist himself just wrote, "His work will live on for many, many years." That's the highest accolade a scholar can receive, and I'm sure the prediction will come true.

Perhaps his most famous book was Marriage in Men's Lives. It was awarded the Goode Book Award from the American Sociological Association for the best book in the sociology of the family.

Its punch line was that marriage actually MAKES men better, not just that better men get married. Married men BECOME healthier, harder working, more involved in their communities, and more charitable. No one else had ever shown that.

Beneath all the sophisticated statistics of his analysis, however, I can't help but see autobiography. As I said before, marriage was great for Steve.

Steve was also proud that he took his scholarship out of the ivory tower into the real world. In the federal executive branch and elsewhere he helped design policies to promote marriage and healthy family life.

A personal disclosure here: Steve and I collaborated on many projects. We were a great team. He provided the brains and ideas; I inserted a few commas and got my name on the article. A good deal if you can get it.

Steve always professed to be first and foremost a researcher, but I always sensed he protested too much. I think deep in his heart he actually loved teaching more than anything. His talents were recognized. He was awarded the All-University Outstanding Teaching Award.

The secret to his success was that he was so enthusiastic about his subject and so enthusiastic about his students learning it. Students always knew that he was on their side. He even could get math-phobic students to learn statistics and enjoy the challenge. He bragged about their "conversions."

Steve's office door didn't close. Nothing gave him more pleasure than helping the stream of students looking for help with their research. They always got a smile, encouragement and good advice. And when a student got published, he practically burst with pride. One of our grad students, Tristan Bridges echoed the sentiments of many, "Of all the people in the department, he probably had the least amount of time to give but always gave the most." He taught sociology, but he also taught the good life.

Pull all this together and you know that Steve was truly one of the good and noble people of the earth. May his soul always brighten our days and inspire us to live a full and passionate life.

No hearse for Steve, he's driving his Corvette.