

Julie Willis eulogy for her father Gary Willis

March 11, 2023

Thinking about the characteristics of a “good man.”

Good men tell the truth.

Good men keep their promises.

Good men take responsibility for their actions.

Good men treat others with respect.

Good men get back up when they fall.

Good men are emotionally available to their families.

Good men make positive impact in the lives of others.

Good men are good friends.

Good men stand up for what is right.

Good men are spiritual leaders in their families.

Good men invest in bringing up the next generation of good men.

Hello. I’m Julie Willis, and I am speaking today on the behalf of my family, as we celebrate the life of a good man. You may know him as a former colleague, a classmate, a cousin, an in-law, an uncle, a sibling, a grandfather, a soon-to-be great grandfather, a friend, a dad, or as a dear husband. Some of you here may not have known him at all, but are here to support those of those that do. To all of you we say welcome. Thank you for sharing this beautiful day with us.

I use the word beautiful, because Gary Willis was a lover of beautiful things.

He loved music. As a musician, he was self-taught. He took one piano lesson and came home and told his mother he was taking piano lessons. His mother said you can't take piano lessons because they did not have a piano. So he would break into to the church through the window so he could practice on the church piano. He eventually got caught so they just gave him the key. Through learning the piano he developed a love for traditional hymns and southern gospel. Years later, after meeting my mother, he fell in love with the world of opera. He would often spend Saturday afternoons tinkering in the basement or shed, listening to Saturday Afternoon at the Met. ON several occasions he would call out to me to come join him so I could hear Beverly Sills. "Julie, listen. She's going to die above High C!" My mother eventually earned an appreciation for southern gospel. In his final days he received great comfort from both.

My dad loved his beautiful yard. He loved to spend his days outside mowing, weeding, planting. In the winter he would talk of his plans for the summer. What he would plant, what would go where. This love for the outdoors was also demonstrated in the work he did for the beautification committee. For reference, the 4 corners where main street and route 37 connect was his corner. He would spend hours planting that corner, measuring each stem to make sure they were perfect. (Measuring stick). He took great joy in using God's creation to make things beautiful. When his grandson, Austin, was a little boy, we would go visit and when it was time to go my dad would stand and say "I need to go mow the lawn." Which was true, as we were usually visiting on the weekend. My nephew took this to

mean “goodbye.” So when they would leave Austin started saying “I’ve got to go mow the lawn.” Over the past few weeks, as my dad’s condition progressed, he sat up in bed in the middle of the night and proclaimed “I’ve got to mow the lawn!” He was starting to say his goodbyes.

He was a fierce protector and advocate for those he loved. Maybe it came from being the oldest son of 7 siblings (six of them sisters). His youngest sister Amy tells the story of how when she was little she had a new doll. It was supposed to be flame resistant. So my dad took the doll and held a flame to its face to make sure. It was fine. I think of the time when my folks had just bought a new car, and it had the reverse camera screen. I was driving it for the first time, and I was hesitant about pulling out of the drive way just using the screen as a guide, and he said “Don’t worry, I already measured it.” He wanted everyone to be safe. And his presence made you feel safe. When his youngest son was in the darkest time of his life, he received a phone call. “Son, it is time for you to come home.” Little did we know then that Justin would become one of my father’s primary caregivers in his last days. As written in Genesis, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”

Just to clarify, I’m not trying to portray Gary Willis as a soft man. If you were ever the target of his quick wit or dry humor, you know how funny, and sometimes cutting he could be. Many times there was point in the conversation where there was just no more conversation. Gary Willis was a numbers guy by trade. He was incredibly smart, having spent his life in the banking world. He also spent time organizing the firewood by

size. He did this his McDonald's French fries as well. Here in my hands is the last thing my father ever wrote to me in his handwriting. A budget. He wrote in January of 2022 to help me get my finances in order. I have yet to start it.

To know my father is to know the love he had for his beautiful sweetheart of almost 55 years. His beautiful wife, and our precious mother. They met in church in Carbondale Illinois. It was around Christmas, and he was the organist at the church and she was there to sing. An opera singer. God knew. They married the following year, and together with their shared love of music, God, and home, they created a beautiful life together. We are so grateful they did. He taught us how to love someone, and love them fiercely. When one of us would talk back or smart mouth my mom, he was quick to step-in, and remind us - not gently – that we were not to talk to his wife that way. How he loved her. And us. Make no mistake – we were not perfect. Neither was he. We are messy like any other family. But his love for us was darn near perfect. As a father, he never missed a concert, recital, piano lesson, or school musical. He even attended the occasional sporting event. Those were very rare occasions in our family.

He was an introvert. Because of this, unless you knew him well, you would not necessarily see the deep heart he had for people. His fervent prayers for his family, friends and co-workers were deep. Which is why, if he were here today, he would want you to know one thing: He wants to see you again. And he would tell you that there is only one way to do that. “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you

that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

John 14:1-3

One of the last things he said was “I’m going home.” His place was finally prepared. And we know it is beautiful.

Dad, may you mow any lawn you want to, or none at all. May there be no more deaths, but many high C’s.

Gary Willis. Now there was a good man.