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Celebrate life as a legacy leader

By Ron Kitchens

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At some point in my life, I discovered by accident that I like poetry.

I am not sure how it happened, but I ended up a fan of Walt Whitman, and not just because he was the first poet I ever read who wrote about baseball. As I have read more about Whitman, I was struck by his years of struggle to find anyone who was the least bit interested in his poetry.

One day he received a letter which read, "Dear Sir, I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of 'Leaves of Grass.' I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I greet you at the beginning of a great career." It was signed "Ralph Waldo Emerson."

What would the world have lost if Emerson had not written that paragraph? How was the world changed by the kindness of a few well-chosen words? At Southwest Michigan First, we would call Emerson a legacy leader as he is a person whose leadership transcends time and place.

If I asked the readers of Business Review to name a legacy leader, a person that has really changed other people lives, most would give me the names of famous or at least wealthy people. A few would even throw in the names of the most-recent-cause celebs who suddenly feel our pain — but no one would mention Maggie Terry.

To be fully transparent, Maggie Terry is my mother-in-law, and I am writing this column as I sit in her living room, or rather what was her living room. Just a few hours ago we held her funeral service.

Maggie was in my life for nearly 25 years, and, while I always appreciated her love of family, especially her grandchildren, I never knew the impact she had on the lives of others.

As her friends and family gathered to place her remains next to her beloved A.B., we were overwhelmed with the outpouring of love and support, but I have to admit I was shocked by two stories that none of her children knew; stories that confirmed to me that Maggie was indeed a legacy leader of the rarest kind.

As we stood in the St. Louis sunshine, a distinguished lady approached us to share her Maggie story. None of us had ever met or, for that matter, ever heard of this lady, but she proceeded to explain in great detail how she had traveled from Denver for the day to say good-bye to Maggie. She wept as she told us of a decade of mentorship, which had culminated with the woman becoming provost at a major university.

“She set higher goals for me than I set for myself” was the truly inspirational thought she shared.

Next, came the man who once taught history to high school freshmen and, by his own admission, was so unhappy with his life and career that he intended to quit teaching. But after a kind word from Maggie and her insistence that he apply for graduate school — at Harvard of all places — he has gone on to become dean of the English department at a prestigious East Coast university.

“She believed in me when I did not believe in myself,” he said.

It is easy to believe leadership is about fame, fortune, notoriety or philanthropy, but the reality is that leadership is about using the tools you have to change the lives of the people you meet every day.

Take the time today to write a kind letter to an unknown author or your kid’s teacher or, if nothing else, tell your mother-in-law you love her. If you change no one else’s life, you will at least change your own.

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