

Jens Otto Gunelson's Celebration of Life Readings at UW-River Falls March 17, 2024

Jordan's reading

Thank everyone for coming

A wise man once told me the purpose of having a celebration of life wasn't to mourn the loss of the deceased, but rather to pay tribute to their life lived. It was a celebration for the living and a time to relive the deceased past in all its glory. That wise man was none other than my Pop's, Jens Otto Gunelson. In honor of him, I would like to focus on his character over the pain his loss has caused. Before I begin, I want to pass along something he said before his passing. He wanted everyone to know that he had accepted his fate and was at peace with dying. Not surprisingly, his only concern was leaving behind his family.

A loss of this magnitude carries an immense amount of grief. I didn't know what life would be like without him. The mere thought of his absence made me sob, so I avoided the thought at all costs. He lived such a meaningful, purposeful, innocent life. A life so pure that I questioned if immortality was possible. He was by all accounts a saint. Inevitably, I knew the day would come where he'd have to be laid to rest, but truly had no way of mentally preparing for it. He wasn't your typical person. Far from one. He was a calming force. The type of person you instantly felt at peace around. He didn't show anger and treated everyone with unwavering kindness. He was logical, yet so empathetic, kind, ambitious, loving, brilliant, hilarious, hardworking, devoted, selfless, generous, patient and the list goes on. He genuinely cared for all living things. Well almost all living things. He had a strong distaste for President Trump.

My Pop's and I were thick as thieves. We were always close, but once I grew out of adolescence, I could publicly admit to adoring him. We spoke multiple times throughout the day, and he was a constant presence in my home. So much so, the neighbors knew him well too. From the beginning, he's been there for all of us. The kids may have called him Papa, but he was their father figure. He helped take care of them when they were sick, injured or just needed their sweet Papa. The safety and wellbeing of his family was of utmost importance. Of course, other things mattered, but at a much lower level. He was always there when one of us needed him. Who am I kidding? He was there for anyone who needed him. He was who he was and you couldn't fault him for it. If anything, we loved him that much more for it. He made a point of regularly letting us know how much we meant. Sometimes words wouldn't suffice, so he'd simply embrace us in a hug. Although, he was notorious for verbalizing his love too.

He never looked at the kids or I with anything other than unconditional love radiating from his eyes. My father didn't raise his voice, let alone yell unless there was imminent danger. He was a communicator through and through. He didn't take things personally and challenged us and I to

do the same. He saw us for all our beauty and wanted us to do the same. He cherished us and wanted nothing more than for us to see what he did. He built our confidence up and when that foundation would begin to crumble, he'd be there with cement keeping our structure from falling.

He's not here with us in physical form, but he'll always be here. You can see his character traits, morals, values and beliefs in each of us. The kids and I strive to be like him. He wasn't just a glass half full man. His glass was filled to the rim. He spun undesirable situations into learning lessons on growth. When hope seemed lost, he found the light and guided others in finding their way. He was an optimist, who despite his arduous battles with cancer, kept this mindset. As our eyes filled with tears each time with the news of cancer, he was the one putting our minds at ease. I'm grateful we spent many years with him. I'm blessed he knew how much he was loved and I'm proud I got to call him my Pop's.

Kali wrote him a letter after he passed, which she'd like to share. It speaks volumes about his character. Before I hand it over to Kali, I'd like to uplift the room by sharing a few stories.

1. We'd often ask him to "dumb it down" when explaining the many topics he knew all too much about. The kids would look to me for guidance and I would try and put it into laymen's terms.
2. He'd chauffeur my friends and I around when we were teenagers. We tended to make frequent cat calls when we'd see a cute boy. Each time he'd tell us to stop, and we didn't listen. One day he tried a different strategy and started pulling the car over in response to our yelling. Not only did we stop this obnoxious behavior, but we also quieted other friends when they rode in the car. Embarrassment was the key and he figured it out.
3. Hilarious: Dressing the dog up in Max's clothing when she refused to get dressed.
4. Using dark humor with pets. Rotten beasties, go play in heavy traffic.
5. Saying he's going to go shoot the basketball team in front of my friends, referencing taking pics, not assassinating anyone.
6. Brilliant: Informed us that the phrase, "I love you to the moon and back" isn't as far as saying, "I love you to the North Star and back", which became our forever phrase.

Kali's Letter

It's crazy to think you're gone and just... ash now. It still feels like your just at the church, Sam's Club getting more strawberries or at your house building something or working on whatever. it's so weird now to be at your house without you. everything's so quiet, and all there's left is 18 years of memories when I turn a corner.

Even though I imagined you being at my Graduation, wedding, and when I have kids, and living until my 40s. I am Beyond blessed to say I had you in my life for an amazing 18 years. God made every good quality there was and put it into one, and that was you. I have never met and don't think will ever meet someone like you. And I'm not even being dramatic, I never heard you yell a day in my life, never saw you get mad, swear, talk down on anyone even if they did bad

things, and worked as hard as you could every day, while always having that positive and funny energy.

I don't know how you had that amount of good energy, every single day, even on such bad days. I miss you, even at 7 o'clock in the morning when you would wake me up by coming up the stairs and singing the song "up the stairs we go" and cheerfully yelling "babies" when you saw max at the top of the steps. and I would yell at you to be quiet, and you would whisper yell "oh, we have to be quiet now" but it was still so loud, even though you tried.

I miss you, even when it took "us" (you) around four or five hours to relearn my math homework that was only around 10 to 15 questions and you watching YouTube tutorials to basically do it for me, and you asking me if I'm understanding it and if I was watching too, and I would say yes every time even though I had no idea what was going on, And just wanted to finish up on the first problem that took around 30 minutes, and I don't know how you were so patient. Because all I wanted to do was to be done with it. And you were always so into it. Now the things I would do to do math again with you again.

I miss you, even though when I couldn't drive, you would never allow two people in the passenger side of your truck, because it was against the law and you would always have to take two trips, from a place and back, when I had a friend with me. I miss the funny TikTok trends I used to do on you because you had no idea what was going on, and I would just laugh at it for so long afterwards. I miss you, even when you would shove the iPad in my face at 10 o'clock in the morning because you always wanted to take photos.

I could go on and on about these, but we would be here for another decade. If someone asked me to call someone but they must answer for \$1 million, it would've been you. When I needed someone right away, you were always there. You made my childhood, and you made the person who I am now. I'm going to carry along everything you have taught me in my 18 years of living and pass it on to others. Seeing the Beauty and good in the little things, knowing that bad things that happened to you are happening for you and not against you.

It's all about perspective, you can either see it as bad or learn to grow from it and it'll only make you better to become a stronger person than before. I will continue to have your spirit guide me and follow the dreams I was put here to accomplish and knowing you would want that for me, while putting your love into the world. Until I see you again, I love you.