

## **Eulogy for Stephen B. Thacker**

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We come together to honor and show our respect, affection and love for Steve. We also gather to better cope with our sadness by celebrating a full life, a life well-lived.

Steve was a person of extraordinary depth and a multitude of attributes with a rich personality and character. Those who knew him from coaching or the neighborhood or work knew a piece of him well. His family knew all the pieces and could see how they were related and reinforced each other.

Growing up in Missouri, with the early loss of his father, and a mother who raised him well while working hard as a nurse, provided the context for his growth, priorities and values. He excelled in all areas – in scouting, he became an Eagle scout, in academics he was at the top of his classes in all subjects, and in high school sports, he played varsity football, basketball and baseball. In his difficult last few weeks when forming even phrases was difficult, while watching a football game on TV, he was asked, “Steve, what position did you play in high school.” Without pause he forcefully exclaimed, “Quarterback!” with a surprising tone of “what a foolish question.” He played the leadership role in most settings in which he was placed. However at home, he was willing to be a supporting back or blocker for the real family quarterback.

Steve’s success in school caught the notice of his teachers. One of these teachers, Ms. Shepard, became his mentor and an adopted aunt. She suggested he apply to Princeton, provided the application fees, was proud when Steve received a full 4 year scholarship and remained a part of his life long after his schooling ended.

I’m sure she recognized that Steve was a quiet genuine intellectual. Throughout his life he was a voracious and constant reader who appreciated great writing and substantive literature. As such he eagerly awaited the short listed candidates for the Booker Award each year and when they became available in paperback obtained them all and read each one.

The English author Zadie Smith in White Teeth, a Booker award finalist, suggests that men and women are “creatures of consequence.”

And Steve’s actions, filled with good deeds, societal contributions and enhanced value to everything he did, made him a person of very great consequence indeed.

Steve worked hard, played hard and enjoyed all aspects of his life day by day. Indeed most who knew him were puzzled at how much he could pack into a day. Ginny Harris went to be Steve’s deputy in a unit at CDC while still in her 20’s. She took the job eager to prove her diligence, productivity and value and demonstrate that Steve had made a wise choice. But in short order, in her own words, she learned that:

“Steve was the hardest working guy I had ever met. When I arrived (on time) at Clifton Road, he had already exercised and accomplished a great deal at his desk. When

I was starving for lunch; he pulled out a 6 oz can of V-8 juice and kept on working. When I left for the day to relieve her son’s babysitter, Steve went by the CDC library to pick up another huge pile of manuscripts to read at home. “

She adds, “I don’t think he slept. Hard as I worked, I never held a candle to Steve’s prodigious workload and output.”

But this hard work and productivity were only part of the story.

Steve had perspective on life and kept its components in balance. I had the pleasure of working on several papers with him and on one of these; we were making progress over the course of an afternoon, when he warned me that he’d be leaving me at 5:15. I ignored the warning and was a bit surprised when, at 5:13, he began gathering his papers, made clear that his next role was basketball coach and invited me to either continue sitting in his office or meet again the next day. He provided a great role model for setting clear and balanced priorities. Steve started coaching girls’ basketball when Maria and Gabriella were on the team but continued at IHM and Pius for another 20 years.

Aside from his support for girls’ basketball, for which Maria and Gabriella may have been somewhat less enthusiastic than their Dad, Steve was deeply devoted to them and their well-being. He was loving and very proud of them.

I’d like to run through some of Steve’s attributes that all of you will recognize:

**Dependability** – Steve was a go-to guy. When a tough task needed a task-master, get Steve. That’s why in his career at CDC, Steve in addition to permanent positions of high authority was often asked to chair a committee or board, to serve as an acting director of a major organization unit and to represent CDC in the upper echelons of government. He would take on difficult and sometimes unpalatable tasks, do them well, and on schedule. An example was that he chaired a committee that both judged CDC staff for promotions and awards in the Commissioned Corps of the US Public Health Service and negotiated with Washington to encourage that the promotions and awards be given. Such tasks mean wading deeply into governmental bureaucratic red tape, dealing with ego challenged General Patton wannabe’s and inevitably having to make decisions that pleased a few and disappointed many. Steve took on the task with a high sense of responsibility and made that committee hum. Through his strengths he got more promotions and awards for CDC staff than anyone even imagined previously and did it in an efficient and almost painless manner. The man could make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear.

In a similar vein, Steve was **steady** – in a time of chaos, fear, confusion, he was rock steady, radiating a “calm in the storm” manner that was infectious and steadied all those around him. Who better to address epidemics? Who better to go to Philadelphia and address Legionnaire’s disease, which he did barely days after his arrival in Atlanta as an EIS officer.

But he balanced the virtues of “dependable” and “steady” with the warm traits of **affable, kind and caring**. He treated everyone with kindness and respect. He was fun to be with at play or work. He thoroughly enjoyed a good party with loud music and dancing, a good book or movie, and fine food and wines. Steve also had a rare ability to exude both confidence and humility at the same time. He was comfortable in his own skin and made all who interacted with him similarly comfortable. In 34 years of friendship, I never ever heard him curse. I never heard him raise his voice at anyone. He rarely offered a negative opinion of anyone. And he was quick to smile and laugh. Displeasure could only be detected by an increased tension in his jaw and narrowing of his eyes. The wise made note of such a reaction. But his default facial expression was a **smile**.

Iris Murdoch, winner of the 1978 Booker, wrote “Being good is just a matter of temperament in the end.” Dostoevsky wasn’t eligible for a Booker but noted that “if you wish to glimpse inside a human soul and get to know a man... watch him laugh. If he laughs well, he’s a good man.” And Steve was a very good man by these criteria.

Steve was also **focused and self-disciplined**. He rarely deviated from his preferred pattern – whether that was rising well before dawn to begin work, ensuring his commitment to daily exercise, or limiting lunch to a 6 ounce can of juice followed by admirable attention to dental hygiene.

Part of that focus was a remarkable balance of family, home, work, play, physical rigor, intellectual rigor, etc. Some here may know Steve primarily from one aspect of his full life – basketball or sharing Braves season tickets or school related activities of Maria and Gabriella or public health work at CDC. But he had many interests – stamp collecting, exploring his family history, baseball and his favorite player, Stan Musial – and brought his long list of attributes to everything he did. He had no conflict about where he needed to be, when it was time to coach girls’ basketball or see a movie with Luz.

Steve’s career at CDC illustrated his high intelligence and how he valued science and quantitative skills. But his love of epidemiology could wander into the rest of his life. Steve labored for many hours, treating the DeKalb County summer swim league record books as sacred archival material in order to compile the Briarcliff Beach Clubswimming records with age groups, swimmer names, events and times such that this information could grace a wall at the club for many years.

But he had no tolerance for pretense or ego. He was unimpressed by title or position and was concerned with social determinants of health long before they became fashionable. In medical school in 1969, Steve was active in a student group that sought to address health and health care inequities, racism, poverty, and a range of other social ills. Steve volunteered to present the Dean a letter of protest or outrage or some such, on an issue that evoked a passionate response. When told the Dean was too busy to see him, but just leave the letter, he declined and sat for hours in the Dean’s outer office until the Dean tried to exit his suite. Steve politely intercepted him, presented the letter with some thoughtful and persuasive verbal commentary and went back to class. So, add **fearless** and **persistent** to his attributes. This event was also the first introduction to Steve of a young staff person in the Dean’s office, Luz Fortes.

This vignette also illustrates Steve's early commitment to social justice, a life-long priority. It is documented in hard numbers not rhetoric: Steve was responsible for CDC's EIS Program for the past 24 years. Steve's own EIS class of 1976 at CDC had 39 officers of whom 3 or 8% were women and 3 or 8% were minorities. The current class of 2012 has 81 officers of whom 55 or 68% are women and 26 or 32% are minorities. A spectacular transformation, in large part thanks to Steve!

Steve also knew what it took to be successful at work, at home and at play. I'll quote not from a Booker award author but one Steve would also admire, Michael Jordan, who said "Talent wins games but teamwork and intelligence win championships." Steve won both.

One more attribute, Steve had very **good judgment** and **taste**. Well, with the exception of those tight, too-short Princeton running shorts that he wore for several decades past their prime and his notion that a black turtleneck jersey conveyed formality.

But for the things that count, Steve's taste was spot on. It begins with his choice of spouse, Luz Fortes Thacker. She has been his loving partner and the Yin to his Yang for 43 years. Her courage, compassion, fortitude, devotion and love were in abundant evidence the last few months. Steve's and the family's trials were eased by her attitude and strength.

Maria and Gabriella were at the center of Steve's thoughts and affection and these daughters adored their Dad. They and their husbands provided constant support that all families would wish to have.

We've seen the myriad of admirable attributes that Steve had. But people are much greater than the simple sum of their parts. And as wonderful as Steve's characteristics were, the package of those pieces was what made all here today love and respect him. He has passed on but will remain a presence for all of us, in our fond memories, in health programs that enhance the lives of many throughout the United States and the world, in a multitude of well-trained public health professionals whose paths he influenced and inspired and in a beautiful and growing family.

Steve triumphed in his own way over a relentless and fierce opponent. In those last weeks and days, as the terrible disease deprived him progressively of functions and independence, it never touched his depth and extraordinary soul – when he was deprived of many means of expression, he would react with a smile, a squeezed hand and even a kiss to affirm the spirit that lay within.

Many people who aren't here today and didn't know Steve and would not recognize his name are healthier and safer because of Steve's efforts and achievements.

We who are here have all been blessed to know or work with or live with Steve and the joys of our relationships remain. Steve, we all miss you, love you, and are better for having known you. Thank you.