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Special Edition



Michael Charles Mason
March 26, 1959 - February 13, 1990

On a cool windy Saturday, February 17, CLMRG members, together with other friends and family, gathered to celebrate the life of our dearly loved Mike Mason. Mike had died of cancer on February 13 at the terribly young age of 30. CLMRG members, Al Green and Bob Huey, spoke about Mike on that occasion. They expressed the love and admiration that we all felt for him. This special memorial edition of the Talus Pile consists of their words and some pictures of Mike provided by his wife, Sally.

Al Green spoke first and emphasized the trouble Mike would go to to make his friends feel special and his courage in fighting his disease. . . Some of Al's words... .

There are many things that we could say in tribute to Mike. I will only try to express his sense of humor, his love of life and his gift for doing the unexpected. So, I will share just a couple examples with you.

The rescue group has a Christmas party each year. We have a bonfire celebration near the top of one of the small hills south of town. A few years ago, we were standing around the fire - telling war stories. During a lull in the conversation, we heard this voice saying "Merry Christmas". We looked up and this guy all dressed up in a Santa Claus suit was bounding down towards us. Of course, it was Mike - and he had presents for us.



Another occasion - a climb on Easter Sunday. This was a trip to Paiute Monument, just East of Independence. While others were busy climbing this little outcrop, Mike managed to hide Easter eggs without anyone noticing. Then during the lunch break, Mike announced that there would be an Easter egg hunt and that there was an egg for everyone and they had to find their egg - not just any egg. He had decorated each egg with a name and a comic comment for each person.

When Bill Stronge moved to England, we had a going away party. Mike wrote, directed and starred, along with Vern Anderson, in a skit that roasted Bill. It was priceless- Mike really enjoyed doing it and it was the highlight of the party.

Almost exactly two years ago, I was with Mike when he wanted to try a new rock climb, one that no one had ever climbed. Mike had already been undergoing major operations and chemotherapy for over a year. He came back from those shotgun

treatments with absolute determination. The climb Mike wanted to do was hard.

Rock climbers grade climbs with a decimal system. 5.0, the easiest, to 5.1, 5.2 and up. It wasn't too long ago that 5.10 was considered impossible. Mike's climb was a 5.10 and, he did climb it. Now a person who puts up a new route gets to name it. He named it "Chemotherapy".

And when asked by others, "How hard is it?": his answer was, "It is so hard it will make your hair fall out!"....

The nurses on the cancer ward at the Medical Center viewed Mike as a real hero and their love for him was evident when they all came in - one by one - to wish him well, when he was getting ready to go home.



Mike on "Chemotherapy"

One of my last conversations with Mike was just before this final chemo treatment. He called and said that he was planning to insulate his garage. He wanted to know how ours was done and discussed costs and options. And Sally has since told me that Mike was working on adding a recreation room to their house. He had drawn the plans and even gone out for cost estimates. It was as if Mike was going to live forever.

For many of us - all who were privileged to know him - Mike will live forever.

Bob Huey spoke next, including words from several of Mike's friends and family.

It's a real honor for me to be here today as part of the celebration of Mike's life - the celebration of his witness to living - to remember Mike's joy and happiness and the joy and happiness he brought into our lives and to others. To honor him. To remember him. To release his physical presence and to accept his spiritual presence.

As I collected thoughts that I had about Mike and collected those from friends and family, one thing struck me and that is that Mike was here as our teacher. People said things about Mike like Mike taught us love, friendship, focus on others, giving, healing, helping, inventiveness, joy, humor, happiness and selflessness.

How did he get there? It seems as though he started the same as I. He was dealt a hand and played out that hand, but he took what are normal activities and he made them special. Mike had family and he created family everywhere he went. Mike was raised by his mother and sisters. Mike did not know his father, but he had many fathers, and especially he was fond of and chose Al Green as his adopted father, over the last 16 years with Mountain Rescue. He had two older sisters and he adopted other sisters. Although he had no brothers, he created brothers from very close friendships.

Shane Kahn was his closest boyhood friend and Shane sent this note:
Shane Kahn to Michael Charles Mason, my closest and bestest buddy, who I'll always love and truly miss, but will never forget our times together, as my best playfriend and neighbor, since two, a schoolmate since time, a dedicated and sincere family and professional friend. I love you, Mike Mason. I'll see you at the gates, buddy. Love, Shane.

To put the icing on the cake of his family, Mike selected the most special person in the world to be with him, Sally. Sally was someone who was sent to Mike to help him recognize his true self, and she brought with her the gift of a step-daughter, Karena, whom Mike loved and learned many lessons from. Mike had family All of us are part of Mike's family.



Mike and Sally Mason

Mike's religious upbringing, at St Ann's Parish School and Church, gave him a foundation for a belief in God, which he struggled with all of his life, as most of us do. This would lead him to a very private faith. It would lead him to prayer and it would lead him to miracles.

His boyhood activities, explorations and interests, brought him into the Boy Scouting program, which led him to Mountain Rescue activities at the age of 14. He was possibly drawn to that activity as are some of us, by the excitement, the adventure and the danger. But he was to learn many other lessons from his activities. At the ages of 15 and 16, he was on searches in Kennedy Meadows, in the desert, near California City, and in Smith Canyon. He was flown to Arizona, to Alanor Lake. He searched the Kern River and went to Mexico to Picacho del Diablo, and he was involved in searches for victims in two plane crashes in Inyo County. At 18, he was a field team leader on a search for a hunter in Ash Canyon.

From school, Mike was led directly into ten years as a mechanical engineering technician at the Naval Weapons Center. There Mike developed more family. Work associates remember Mike's fantastic, fun attitude and every sentence, they said about him, they said with a smile and a laugh. John Campbell, his supervisor, said that the high point of Mike's career was when he was appointed as field test director for a program called FOLPEN. Mike was selected, even though he was a junior member on that team, but he met the criteria for leading that test and he had the enthusiasm and dedication to do a wonderful job.

As Mike matured, Mountain Rescue taught him to focus on others. At 22, he was a field operation leader, on his first operation. Through these efforts Mike helped people of all ages, from several countries and in all kinds of situations - from an 84 year old man hurt on Mt. Whitney to a 7 year old child lost in the desert.

These activities and friendships would have been a fitting tribute for most of us, but Mike taught us something more powerful during his 3 years of illness. During that time he taught us the strength of the human spirit. He taught us of miracles when we turn to a power greater than ourselves. He taught us our true purpose here on earth, which is to help one another. He was able to maintain his focus on others even during his own terrible illness.

Mike lived in the present and lived with joy and humor. During his illness, Mike proposed to Sally on top of Mt. Whitney. Imagine that! Mike had told Sally and Karena that this would be a real easy trip. He said it was comparable to a trip they had done the week before, -which was the first rise out of Onion Valley!

Mike made a choice during his illness - a choice that some of us don't or won't ever make. He made the choice to give power to joy, rather than despair. He made the choice to focus on life, not death. The choice to accept healing rather than defeat and the choice to give, share and help others, rather than to focus on ourselves. Focusing on others was Mike's greatest witness during his illness. After one of his first chemotherapy treatments, he received a call for a rescue in Great Falls Basin, and at a time when he needed to rest and take care of himself, he responded to help someone else.

In the hospital, Mike talked to a youth who tried to commit suicide several times. He impressed on this young man the need to live life. He convinced this man to live. He came back later and thanked Mike for this wonderful gift.

Mike reached out and tried to help other cancer patients who were also in the hospital.

During one of his hospital stays, Mike gave a present to Sally and to us, of a star. He found out how he could officially name a star and put it in the record books. He chose a star below Orion and named it Mike and Sally Mason.

Mike worked with an ecumenical prayer group in Ridgecrest and my observation is that through that work, he was given one more year of life. By his belief in the power of God and the joining through prayer, Mike was with us one more year. After having worked with that group, he was at UCLA Hospital in the second stages of kidney failure, when a night nurse that he had never seen before came in and volunteered to read a passage from the scripture. And a stranger walked into his room and gave him a rosary. At 5:30 in the morning, Mike awoke to find that the swelling in his body from the water that had collected there had gone.

Mike also gave us an opportunity to help others. "A friend in need, is a friend indeed" and we were able to learn the lessons that he was showing us. We were able to help him by taking him on trips to treatment at Loma Linda, to UCLA and to Victorville. Ninety people from NWC gave Mike over 2300 hours of their annual leave so that he could continue to be on the payroll as a full time employee. Friends from Ridgecrest took Mike to the botanical gardens while he was in treatment at UCLA on the weekend of an annual Mountain Rescue trip to Yosemite that Mike had never missed. Literally hundreds of people joined in prayer to help Mike through. -six local congregations, friends, hospital staff and at least one world wide prayer chain. Sally, of course, got the opportunity to give much to Mike. She was a ceaseless companion and she gave him her unselfish love.

His sister found an opportunity to share something with Mike that he shared with me - this poem:

MICHAEL

*When you were just a little boy
and fallen off your bike,
a hug, a kiss, a tender touch*

*would make you feel alright.
I watched you grow to quite a man
how proud I always was,
that you worked so hard toward your goals
and fought for every cause.*

*And now you hurt so much inside
a hurt I cannot feel,
What is God's plan I ask myself,
I know that He can heal.*

*I love you brother oh so much
and wish just for a time
that I would feel YOUR body's pain,
and you could rest in mine.*

*Love,
Cathy*

I accepted Mike as my teacher only in the last year or year and a half of his life. Before that I could not consider myself a real friend of his. It's phenomenal that in his dying, he was teaching me about life. We had wonderful trips to and from the hospital where we shared philosophy; we shared laughter; we shared experiences.. Mike wanted us to remember him as well and alive. We can keep him alive in our minds. Members from the Mountain Rescue Group that have left us before were Carl Heller, Ray VanAken. and Corinna Peterson Carl and Ray are alive in our minds as the founders of our rescue group. Corinna taught us to witness through love and she left the message from a verse of the song called "The Rose" that said "love - it is a flower and you its only seed". Mike was the seed of love and so are we. Mike said that when he got to heaven, he was going to join Corinna and Carl and together, they'd put up a new climbing route. He was going to name that route "Heavens to Betsy".

Carl Zorzie remembers a warm summer day when he and Mike climbed high above Lake Tahoe. He says

"We went high above to the meadow of the snow where the orange flowers grow, where they overlook the calm blue water and the forest below. A place where eagles soar and men can dream. Perhaps the ancient chiefs had met on this sacred ground. This was a peaceful place in the heart, where a friend and hero will always stay alive. He will always be the warm wind beneath our wings".

To remember him, Mike gave us an opportunity to give to others selflessly. Mike gave us a new star. He gave us a climbing route on Bob Joy's fireplace. Mike asked us to remember his life, his humor, his health.

Thank you Mike. We love you..



During Mike's 16 years with CLMRG, he made many significant contributions. He participated in 91 operations, 16 as a Field Team Leader and 11 as Operations Leader. He was an exceptional rock climber and one of CLMRG's best mountaineers. He helped teach CLMRG's summer mountaineering class every year. While undergoing treatment for cancer, he compiled and updated the CLMRG Training Manual. He was Vice-president of CLMRG during 1988 and 1989. He continued going on operations, sometimes the next day after returning from chemotherapy - at least 11 times.

The group has received many donations in Mike's memory. Our intent is to use these donations to build a fitting and permanent memorial - a practice climbing wall at our hut.