

Rudi Bethke, Sr.

July 29, 1940 – February 1, 2010

We are gathered here today to pay farewell to my dad, Rudi Bethke, Sr. How does one sum up a life as faceted as his?

He was born Rudi Wenk on July 29, 1940 in Germany during the height of World War II; the second child of Hans and Margarete Wenk. As a young boy, he survived allied bombings and the aftermath of war. It was not until the age of five that my dad received his first piece of chocolate, and it was from an American GI.

Shortly after the war, his parents divorced and his mother married a U.S. soldier named Henry Bethke. For the chance to better his life by moving to America, Rudi agreed to be adopted by his mother's new American husband. Rudi was then able to move with his mom and adoptive father to the United States on October 10, 1958 at the age of 18. In his possession, was all that he owned packed in two small suitcases, with a few dollars he had earned as a pinboy in Germany.

He eventually arrived in Baltimore and the Bethke Farm. It was here in Baltimore where he began his American life as Rudi Bethke. With sheer determination, he learned to speak English without ever receiving formal instruction. He strived to learn everything American for that is what he wanted to be "an American!"

In 1960, he was introduced to a young girl named Charlotte from Montford Avenue. Charlotte admits that for several months, she had trouble understanding the young German, but despite the difficulty with his broken English, Charlotte nodded and shook her head through many late evenings with him. It was not long before Rudi was finding it difficult to part with his young beauty. Happy and in love, he never minded that his late visits caused him to miss the last bus of the evening. On many occasions, Rudi found himself walking no less than twenty blocks back home to his small apartment in Highlandtown in the middle of the night.

Even though Rudi was not yet a U.S. citizen, he still answered the call to duty and enlisted in the U.S. Army. While on a nine-day pass, he came home to Baltimore to marry his sweetheart, Charlotte, at the Basilica downtown. His honeymoon night was spent at the New Motel on Pulaski Hwy and included a trip the following day to Lexington Market and Reads. After his brief honeymoon, he returned to California and then was shipped out to Korea where he began a fifteen-month tour of duty.

Dad worked very hard to ensure that within months before leaving the service, he finally became a U.S. citizen. On December 28, 1964 in Raleigh, NC he was presented with his naturalization papers. Yes, dad was definitely proud to be an American! To this day, dad's naturalization papers remain displayed in his home. Sometimes, I think he secretly feared he would be deported and wanted to ensure the papers were handy!

When he returned to his wife in Baltimore, he began his new job as a conveyor belt engineer and soon became a master at his trade at the Maryland Rubber Company. Dad worked long hours, but never complained. Everything he did, he gave it his all. He was even featured in his company's brochure. For my dad, working hard was what was expected

and there was no other way. He continued in this field until 1982 when Briggs Rubber closed their Baltimore branch.

In 1966, after another Baltimore blizzard, Rudi and Charlotte received a little package - ME!!! Rudi became a father and his family was complete. My dad enjoyed being a father. That was easily seen by the many times he volunteered for school activities. It was important to my dad for me to know how much he cared, and I always knew it.

I had a great father and I feel extremely lucky and blessed to have had him.

My dad worked hard for everything he had and was always willing to share with those who had less. When it came time for me to go to college, dad insisted that I study business so I wouldn't have to work as a laborer, like he did. He wanted me to have opportunities that he did not. He did whatever he could to make my life easier than his was. Mom and dad worked extremely hard to take care of all my college costs so that I would not have any debt when I started down my own life's path. I am grateful.

In 1982, he took a position with Baltimore as a common laborer. He spent a lot of time in the blacksmith shop and shortly afterwards applied for and secured the position as Baltimore's only blacksmith. He proudly held this position for twenty-two years and when he retired in 2004 he would be the last blacksmith ever to be employed by the City of Baltimore. Dad never hesitated spending extra hours in his shop making iron tables and other hand-made crafts for friends and family. Working in the intense heat also ensured that dad had a year-round tan, which he happily flaunted!

In 1995, with the birth of my daughter, Katelyn, he became a grandfather and then again in 1998 with the birth of my son, Bryan. He loved being pop pop and doted on his grandchildren. Everyone knew that Dad would have done anything for his grandchildren. He and my mom even went as far as relocating to Mt. Laurel, NJ in order to be with their grandchildren and help in any way they could when I needed them. There was rarely a baseball or softball game played where you wouldn't see him at the field cheering on the kids, bringing them snacks and just letting them know that he thought they were doing a great job. If dad was not at a ball field, you would either find him keeping busy doing my yard work—an added plus—or swimming in his neighborhood pool. He loved to swim.

On January 8th, dad went to his doctor because he 'just didn't feel right.' Later that day, he was admitted to the hospital and over the next week received numerous tests. We soon learned that dad had cancer and his health was quickly deteriorating. He was given one fighting chance -- to receive a round of chemo and pray that it would improve his condition. Like everything else in Dad's life, he chose to fight for what he wanted -- life. He decided to receive the chemo, even though he understood the risks -- the chemo itself could take his life. Dad put up a good fight, but the cancer won out. Just three days after his chemo, on February 1st at 9:18 PM, he peacefully and quietly passed. At his side was his devoted wife Charlotte of 47 years, Karen, and I.

No, he wasn't much in the eyes of the world, but he was the world to me. Growing up as a boy, my dad was



always bigger than life to me. Being 6'3" helped too!! As I quickly grew, my dad taught me that it wasn't about the height that made the man; it was character. Anyone who knew Dad would surely tell you that dad was full of character. One could easily see his determination, self-reliance, pride, and resourcefulness. Without question, he was not just a man with

broad shoulders; he was a man with a huge heart, who loved his family. So while we are here today to say our goodbyes, let us remember all the things that Rudi has achieved *and* all the things he was to so many people. Please join me in applauding his life.