

A CELEBRATION OF THE LIFE OF
SIMON WILLIAM MAJOR

13th May 1946 – 7th October 2018

held at
West Berkshire Crematorium
on 18th October 2018



Humanist Celebrant

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ENTRANCE

In My Life – The Beatles

OPENING WORDS

Good afternoon everyone. We're here to celebrate the life of Simon William Major who died at the Duchess of Kent Hospice on 7th October aged only 72.

INTRODUCTION

I should introduce myself. My name is Ian Willox. I'm a celebrant for Humanists UK. Simon's family have asked for a Humanist funeral – a non-religious funeral. That doesn't mean anti-religious. This is a ceremony for everyone – including those with a religious faith.

THOUGHTS ON LIFE AND DEATH

With or without religion, one of the purposes of a funeral is to remember - so that Simon lives on in our memories.

Jan and the children compiled notes of some those memories. It came to seven pages.

In other words – there's a lot to remember. So we'd better get a move on.

TRIBUTE

Simon was born in Nottingham. His father, William, was an electrical engineer who was in the RAF – so the family moved around a lot. His mother, Olga, was a housewife with an enormous sense of fun and a love of penny slot machines, pontoon, and gin rummy. She taught her children and her grandchildren how to play cards – they think probably in order to subsidise her pension.

Simon has a younger sister, Veronica, to whom he was a loving and devoted brother. Apart from that time he was caught trying to feed her worms while she was in her pram.

Apparently Simon was not always the fine upstanding citizen he became. At the tender age of three he fed the family cutlery through the drain cover. He delighted in cutting the laden washing line.

When the family lived for a while in New Romney he would roam the marshes – often coming home minus a welly. If ever you walk that way, chances are you'll come across one.

At the age of ten he was brought home one evening by a policeman who had hold of him by the ear. He and a friend had been playing on a building site. It was cold. So they built a fire. In the workmen's toilet. Which also caught fire. A certain amount of bribery was required of both boy's fathers to avoid a charge of arson.

An unruly childhood, it turns out, made Simon a rather special father. Here's his son Sam to share just a few memories

Sam Major

Memories of Dad

In spite of everything, there have been times in the last few weeks where, as a family, we've laughed, as we recall how fun-loving, mischievous and full of life Dad was. That's how we, his children, remember him.

When we think about Dad, we often think about walking. Or, more accurately, the badger spotting, tree rope swinging or lively cow pat fighting, that made those hours more than just a trudge. On one such stroll, he persuaded us to hold hands in a row, only for him to grab an electric fence and send a shock through us all. You have to admire that level of commitment, just to witness your children sizzle. But then, he was a very convincing man. I mean, he once managed to persuade me that a Brillo pad was a sponge cake. Although, that may say more about me than him!

He was always a keen prankster, and forever got the better of us. One April Fools Day was particularly harrowing for Laura, when taking care of a friend's pet, and following a very cold night, she was woken early by Dad asking 'Do you know what a frozen guinea pig looks like?'. Similarly, we recall the old cling film over the toilet gag backfiring when, thinking we'd well and truly outwitted him, Dad launched at us, what we later found out, was a cling film pouch full of apple juice.

We were never allowed to mope on sofas. In fact, Katia was sent to primary school for a week with an undiagnosed broken collarbone, before he conceded she may need to go to the doctors. But what he lacked in medical knowledge he made up for with enthusiasm. As we discovered following a foray into mushroom foraging – which left Bethany vomiting and Mum less than impressed. Or that time, he suggested that a cure for a cut arm was a healthy plunge in a stagnant horse trough. Although, the mental scars may in fact, be worse, as Laura and Katia recall enduring the horrific 'birds and the bees' talk, which was accompanied by, of all things, a pop up book. I'm assured nothing is more terrifying to a teenage girl, than turning a page to reveal a giant, 3D sperm.

Never one to sit still, Dad had a few near misses himself. I remember the sheer horror of hedge cutting at 2 Park Farm Cottages, which saw him leaning ladders at jaunty angles, before teetering atop with a chainsaw. Not to mention the time I witnessed him hitting himself in the head with a sledgehammer. He was always busy, from the early hours, and so tried to persuade us to be morning people too. His wake up regime was brutal; curtains drawn, radio loud, light on, and if really required, a wet flannel to the face. It made the army seem positively inviting.

Of course, we got our own back in our teenage years, when Dad took his life in his hands and taught all four of us to drive. In fairness, that probably shaved a few years off. In fact, he taught us many useful lessons over the years; how you bath a cat in a sink, how you medicate a chicken with a syringe, how you shouldn't stick your bare hand in an angry beehive. Not forgetting of course, in later life, his legendary dance moves. Often, at family occasions you'd find him skidding around on the dance floor, minus shoes, because his footwear was, I quote, 'too grippy for dancing'. And that was,

of course, his greatest life lesson, the one we will all endeavour to live by; 'never take life too seriously'.

Dad was utterly committed and devoted to us. He truly gave us the best childhood. From throwing gunge filled, book themed, punk parties, to reading endless bedtime stories – with, I hasten to add, categorically the world's best impression of Gollum from *The Hobbit*. From French cricket in the garden, to endless hours of sledging, catch and, of course, fatherly advice, he was never too tired or busy to give us his time.

He was generous, wise and completely brilliant, and I know I speak for myself, Katia, Laura and Beth when I say, thanks Daddio. And who knows, maybe one day we'll be lucky enough to feed our own children Brillo pads too.

Just a few memories of Simon. Here are some more – compiled by his family. They say:

"Dad instilled self-belief and encouraged people to take calculated risks to change their lives for the better. He encouraged them to believe anything was possible. He was way ahead of his time. A hands-on dad with a completely gender neutral approach to raising his children. For example, the girls all have lethal throwing arms and Sam, well we discovered fairly early on that he rocks a dress!"

"Dad was passionate about equality and education and opportunity for all. He encouraged his children to be questioning, interested, challenging, politically aware, to have a social and moral conscience, a sense of adventure and to do what they believe is right."

"Simon was a dearly loved and 'brilliant' uncle to Joanna, Tom, Sharon and Simon and a great uncle to Georgia and Mia and loved equally by Joanna's husband Chris and Tom's wife Grace. He was always so caring, encouraging, interested in their lives and they are so thankful to him for that."

"Simon loved his children's partners Nathan, Tom, Jenni and Andy. He took an active interest in their lives and was always there with advice and support – if needed. He thought Katia, Laura, Sam and Bethany had chosen very well"

"Simon also took an active interest in the lives of his children's friends, and he is fondly remembered by them, some of whom are with us here today."

"His honesty, integrity, loyalty and sense of humour meant he was a treasured and much-loved brother-in-law to Lynda, Peter, Gerry and Tony."

"Dad had the extraordinary ability to find the right words when others struggled. He would speak from the heart eloquently and movingly with no preparation at times of huge emotion. He was also a straight talker believing you should say what you mean and mean what you say."

“Although he found social situations difficult he had the ability to go up to anyone, start a conversation and be genuinely interested in what they had to say. Even during his stints in the urology ward at the Royal Berkshire over recent months he built a rapport with the staff, doctors and nursing team alike, walking around the ward and taking a particular interest in the lives of the junior doctors. People were engaged by him and he quickly gained their respect.”

“He loved to keep fit – he was a gym bunny since the 80’s long before it became a thing. Loved playing badminton and more recently joined the village table tennis group. He was always delighted if holiday accommodation included a table tennis table so he could thrash the children and their partners in a highly-charged, competitive game of ping pong! He loved to watch football and the family have many memories of him and Jan’s elderly mum Rose yelling ‘encouragement’ at the TV screen.”

“He was a lifelong keen fisherman inspired by time spent fishing with his Dad, Bill, who often came home without having caught anything but remaining enthusiastic!”

“He was a passionate and green-fingered gardener creating a beautiful garden at home in Mead Lane. He and Jan transformed an overgrown allotment plot a year ago into a productive vegetable patch and cut flower garden. He loved the tranquillity and rewards of growing his own produce. His love of gardening has been passed down the family.”

“He was an avid reader with multiple books on the go and a house groaning with books which he was always reluctant to part with. He read everything from novels through to philosophy and astronomy.”

“Simon was both a perpetual student and perpetual teacher and technically has 5 degrees having supported all the children through their studies often buying books so that he could read around the subject to help them. He took it quite personally if essay marks were lower than he had anticipated!”

“He was always a firm believer in the benefits of education and continued his own studies with Philosophy courses in Oxford. He loved getting his head around complex philosophical arguments. He would catch the bus from the park and ride and rush to the front seat on the top deck - he never lost touch with his inner child!”

“But like all of us he wasn’t perfect, he had his grumpy side and, in the interest of balance, we should share that he loved nothing better than a good argument on the phone with BT (or any other utility provider to be fair). You may not believe it, but, he was barred from a couple of places including a local pet shop and a dog groomers – the family can fill you in on either of these stories if they pique your interest. “

Just a few of those Simon things...

But we haven't mentioned his own degree in Sociology (as Simon always said – well, it was the 60s). His PhD at Durham that unfortunately, had to be abandoned due to lack of funds. Lecturing in Social Studies at Walsall and Staffordshire College.

This was the period of his life when, married to his first wife, Francoise, Katia's Mum, he was balancing the day job with his passion for politics, the Labour Party and campaigning for social justice.

In the 70s, Simon and his friend Barrie Blower (now MBE) established Caldmore Housing Association, which is still in existence today as a huge Association providing homes for many. He set up possibly the first refuge for vulnerable Asian women and he was highly regarded in the multi-ethnic community in which he served.

It was through his social activism that the BBC spotted him and eventually inveigled him into becoming a Further Education Radio Producer. He was the first producer allowed to record interviews with prison inmates. He produced many series for Radio 4 and for a while co-presented and produced a Radio 1 talk show with Annie Nightingale.

He set up BBC Radio Berkshire. He worked at BBC Radio Solent and became Head of Training at BBC Radio where he built a reputation as an inspiring trainer, and continued to work there until last year.

Simon's family have been deeply touched by the moving messages from so many of his former colleagues and friends who remember him with such high regard and fondness.

His friend and colleague Trudi Wakeman, says he helped over 1,000 producers on the 'Running A Programme Team' course alone and there are many executive producers walking around today who have had their careers developed by him.

With his former BBC colleague, Karol Cioma, Simon delivered training for CIRCOM – a professional association of Regional Public Service Television in Europe. Karol says: "Simon trained over 100 TV professionals and the legacy he leaves is that he helped establish TV trainers in numerous countries and regions across Europe. He will be remembered for his sympathetic approach and insightful knowledge of how to be a good trainer reflected in the fact that tributes have come from the UK, Ireland, Norway, Croatia, Holland, Germany and Albania."

Simon continued to give to his local community as Chairman of Governors of Basildon Primary School. He took huge pleasure in supporting the head teacher, Paul, and his team, helping to create an environment where children loved to learn, felt happy and safe and achieved academically.

We're going to finish with some final memories of Simon from his friend Graham Terry:

Graham Terry:

To Jan and the Major family,

I am writing this having just heard that Simon has died and so I hope you will understand that this may be less considered and eloquent than perhaps it would be given time. I hope however that in writing it now it expresses most clearly what Simon meant to me.

I cannot fully appreciate how devastating this is for you all and extend my concern and sympathy for your loss and both Sue and I will be thinking of you all. I don't want my thoughts to any way dilute the magnitude of your loss as a family but simply to express as Simon's friend the void I now feel has opened up in my life and I am sure in the lives of many others.

You will know that for many years Simon and I met regularly. Our meetings often comprised a visit to some event, a museum, gallery, nuclear establishment or anything that would justify a subsequent discussion of 'life' over a pint. These started whilst we were in Upper Basildon but continued in Oxford after Sue and I moved. "Life" was indeed the topic and whilst the conversations always tracked the progress of our respective families it also ranged widely from politics, philosophy, science, art and people. It gave us both a safe space to talk about everything; loves, fears, good and bad. Simon had always characterised himself as prone to melancholy but this never showed. Rarely did we dwell on problems although we never shied away from discussing them. The most dominant feature of our talks, however, was a shared sense of humour which regularly strayed into the bizarre and surreal leaving us both wondering how the conversation had strayed so far from whatever the original topic had been.

Always I returned home from these meetings feeling that my world had been enriched and for that I will be forever grateful to Simon.

Simon had an enduring curiosity about the world; when he attended a course entitled "The Meaning Of Life" our conversations tracked the progress of the course and we shared some of the ideas arising from each session – I was eagerly anticipating an answer to the meaning of life, so how disappointed was I when Simon missed the final session! May be the answer would have been "family" because it was evident that family was at Simon's core and will be his enduring legacy.

Simon was intelligent, funny, caring and a great, great friend – it was a privilege to be his friend- I will miss him.

On the first of October Simon married Jan at the Royal Berkshire Hospital. And, being Simon, he made a touching speech from his sickbed. The family around him.

Always.

Whether in the hospital or the hospice, day and night Jan was at his side. During his final two days the family moved into Simon's room. He was never alone.

He died, with his family with him, on 7th October.

QUIET REFLECTION

We're coming to the end of this celebration of Simon's life. But before we do we're going to pause for a moment of reflection. A chance for you to digest all you've heard. A chance for you to recall your own memories of him. A chance, to watch some key images of his life. A chance, if you wish, to pray silently.

Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes - Paul Simon

Before the committal Sue Terry – friend of Simon and Jan, wife to Graham - is going to read the Brian Patten poem *So Many Different Lengths Of Time*:

Sue Terry:

So Many Different Lengths Of Time by Brian Patten

How long does a man live after all?

A thousand days or only one?

One week or a few centuries?

How long does a man spend living or dying
and what do we mean when we say gone forever?

Adrift in such preoccupations, we seek clarification.

We can go to the philosophers
but they will weary of our questions.

We can go to the priests and rabbis
but they might be busy with administrations.

So, how long does a man live after all?
And how much does he live while he lives?
We fret and ask so many questions -
then when it comes to us
the answer is so simple after all.

A man lives for as long as we carry him inside us,
for as long as we carry the harvest of his dreams,
for as long as we ourselves live,
holding memories in common, a man lives.

His lover will carry his man's scent, his touch:
his children will carry the weight of his love.
One friend will carry his arguments,
another will hum his favourite tunes,
another will still share his terrors.

And the days will pass with baffled faces,
then the weeks, then the months,
then there will be a day when no question is asked,
and the knots of grief will loosen in the stomach
and the puffed faces will calm.
And on that day he will not have ceased
but will have ceased to be separated by death.

How long does a man live after all?
A man lives so many different lengths of time.

COMMITTAL

Just as we welcome a child into our lives we must say goodbye to those who leave us. This celebration of Simon's life is complete. It's time to say farewell to him. This may be difficult but it is important. I hope the memories we've talked about here may give you some comfort. Please stand for the committal.

FINAL FAREWELL

Our atoms and molecules come from the earth;
Are ordered by ancestry;
Are fired into life by union;
Are sustained by the earth and powered by the sun;
And return to the earth when life ends.
John Stuffin

Simon William Major. Son of William and Olga. Brother to Veronica. Husband to Jan. Father of Katia, Laura, Sam and Bethany. Brother-in-law to Lynda and Peter, Gerry and Tony. Uncle to Joanna, Tom, Sharon and Simon. Great Uncle to Georgia and Mia. Father in Law to Nathan, Tom, Jenni and Andy. Friend and listener to many.

We commit your body to be cremated. Rest in the hearts and minds of all you love and all who love you.

CLOSING WORDS

Please be seated. We've celebrated Simon's life. We've said our goodbyes. But we have our memories. And the rest of our lives to remember him.

If you want to share those memories – or just some refreshment – you're warmly invited to join the family at The Bull Inn in Stanford Dingley. You'll find details in your order of service.

As you leave you'll see that you can make a donation in Simon's memory to the Sue Ryder Duchess of Kent Hospice, who took such good care of him and his family in his final days. Again you'll find details in your order of service.

Please take good care of yourselves and each other.

Thank you for coming.

EXIT

End of the Line - The Traveling Wilburys