

# A celebration at 70

## Part 1: Family and friends pay tribute to Tommy Williams, the man who overcame obstacles, persevered through health issues, and continues to thrive today

As family members and friends took turns trying to describe Tommy Williams, one word kept coming up over and over again.

"Tommy's a very *cool* guy," began his nephew, Jack. "Like on a 1950s street corner, rock concert type of guy who can just sit there and talk to anybody."

"He's definitely the cool guy," added his daughter, Mellissa. "I would describe him as a cool, laid-back dad."

Added his nephew, Nick: "I think of a suave, cool cat with a cigar in his mouth, all smiles, telling a story."

"He's always been a cool dude. He's just got this cool vibe," contributed his sister-in-law, Ru. "Tommy's just a laid-back, easy-going, golf-loving, social butterfly. He's like a cool dude in a loose mood."

Amazing descriptions, for sure. But as it turns out, being cool only scratches the surface of what makes Tommy special and why 17 family members and friends wanted to honor Tommy as he approaches his 70th birthday.

"He's such a loving person," said Tommy's grandson, August. "He's very nice, really kind and extremely friendly."

"He's definitely in a league of his own," added his niece, Nicole. "Tommy is Tommy. He does what he wants, he does it with passion, and he doesn't let anyone get in his way."

And when his friends picture Tommy?

"I picture him smiling from ear to ear," Glenn said, emphatically.

"I picture that Dos Equis commercial – 'The most interesting man in the world,'" added Leighton. "That's what comes to mind for me."

"I don't ever remember being in his company and not having a good time," said Warren. "I always look forward to spending time with him."

The same, of course, could be said for the person who has spent more time with Tommy than anyone over the last 25 years.

"I just think he's the most authentic, real person I've ever been next to," Wendy said. "He's him. What you see is what you get. He's so friendly. He's so unassuming. He's so unthreatening. He's just an all-around great guy."

Added Nick: "Everyone has a story about Tom. He's someone that leaves a mark. He's someone that people remember."

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While many of his Princeton peers grew up in middle-class or upper-class homes, Tommy Williams did not. On the contrary, Tommy's tale began in the projects of Jersey City.

"Everybody has a story," said his mother-in-law, Marilyn, "and Tommy came from extreme poverty. But little by little, he worked his way out of it."

Without a doubt, the Montgomery Projects was a challenging environment. There were kids running around playing sports all day long. But there was also crime, violence and drugs.

Not an ideal situation by any means.

"We grew up in a very, very rough neighborhood, and Tommy was very impacted by it," acknowledged his brother, Mike Sr. "But he managed to get out of it. It was a bit of a miracle."

Looking back, those years in Jersey City – and many of the years that followed – laid a foundation for Tommy's entire life. In particular, his early years ignited the central themes of resilience and perseverance and the ways in which Tommy created a magnificent life out of virtually nothing.

"He didn't grow up with anybody owning anything," Wendy explained. "So now he takes a great deal of pride in ownership. Owning our home, owning his car, making a living way beyond his expectations and being able to provide for himself and me – that's something he's very proud of."

And, in turn, others are proud of Tommy for the beautiful life he's created.

"I admire that he created a wonderful life for himself without the best circumstances," said Nicole.

"Where he came from, to what he's accomplished," marveled his son-in-law, Peter. "From a kid in the projects of Jersey City to a happily retired guy in Princeton. It's been quite a journey all these years."

In fact, sometimes when Warren and Tommy are in the midst of a truly magnificent moment – like when they were in Tuscany, sharing a drink and a cigar while overlooking the beautiful scenery of Central Italy – one of them will turn to the other and smile.

"Not bad for a couple of kids from the projects."

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Tommy is protective of his past. He'll talk about it, but mostly just with close friends and family.

Still, those who know Tommy best understand that after his time in Jersey City, one of the most significant steps to his recovery and eventual blossoming was his time at Synanon.

"He's told me all about it," said his friend, Jose. "He incorporates everything that he learned at Synanon to become a better man. And he has become a *great* man. That's why I'm most proud of him."

Synanon is full of success stories, but Tommy the 1970's chef belongs in the category of *major* success stories.

"A lot of people didn't think he'd make it to 20, let alone 70," acknowledged Mellissa. "He kind of beat the odds."

"I admire his perseverance. I admire the life he's created for himself," added his nephew, Mike Jr. "If you turn back the clock 40 or 50 years, you probably wouldn't expect him to be where he's at today. I think that's awesome."

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While Tommy takes pride in his family, his friends and (depending on the day) his golf game, he also is particularly proud of his heritage.

"He's proud as hell to be Irish," said Mike Jr. "He identifies as an Irishman and he really cares a lot about where our family came from."

Tommy bleeds green, and it's rather obvious to those who know him best.

"He's very Irish, but not a gregarious Irishman," Jack said. "He's like the wise old Irishman."

"Sometimes the Irish comes out of him," quipped his friend, Dr. Michael Richardson. "He'll swear at you, but you'll see a half-smile come out of his face."

Starting in the early 1980s, Tommy and his brother didn't miss a St. Patrick's Day parade for more than two decades.

"Being Irish is very, very important to him," said Mike Sr.

"He takes a great sense of pride in being Irish," added Mellissa. "Our Irish roots and going to the St. Patty's Day parade and singing Irish songs and growing up in an Irish Catholic household had a big influence on him."

In fact, he and Wendy marched in the St. Patty's Day parade on one of their first dates. The two of them also have traveled to Ireland twice, and Tommy of course has been there several other times, as well.

"Ireland is such a special country," Wendy said. "The people are the most friendly I've ever met. Tommy – what can I say – he just belonged there!"

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Tommy went to the school of hard knocks, for the most part, but you wouldn't know it by looking at his hobbies and passions.

"For a guy who didn't spend a lot of time in education, he's very cultured and has a top-shelf set of interests," Jack said.

Most days you'll be able to find Tommy at the cigar bar. He often can be seen wearing his flat cap. He likes to walk in and take control of the remote, which he'll use to flip back and forth between golf and baseball. And of course he's always seeking a willing partner to engage in conversation.

"He's interested in people," Dr. Richardson said. "He tells his story, but he also wants to hear *their* story. And that's just Tommy. He'll talk about anything that interests you. He makes people feel welcome. He's engaging. He doesn't want anybody to feel left out."

In fact, that's how he met Jose 15 years ago.

"He just stuck his hand out: '*Hi, Tommy Williams. How are you?*' That's always been Tommy," Jose described. "We've been inseparable ever since."

Leighton also met Tommy randomly, on the golf course, about 20 years ago.

"I thought, 'This guy looks like he's a really good dude,'" Leighton recalled, "and the rest is history. We've been friends since that day."

In fact, Tommy still plays golf several times a week. "Golfing is his middle name," said Marilyn.

Additionally, he plays chess with friends, with strangers and of course with his grandson.

"He's like the king of chess," August said. "I think I beat him once ever."

Another one of his passions is food. Tommy does the cooking in his house and of course he loves to eat.

"He has a big appetite," Wendy said. "He loves everything from a hot dog to chateaubriand."

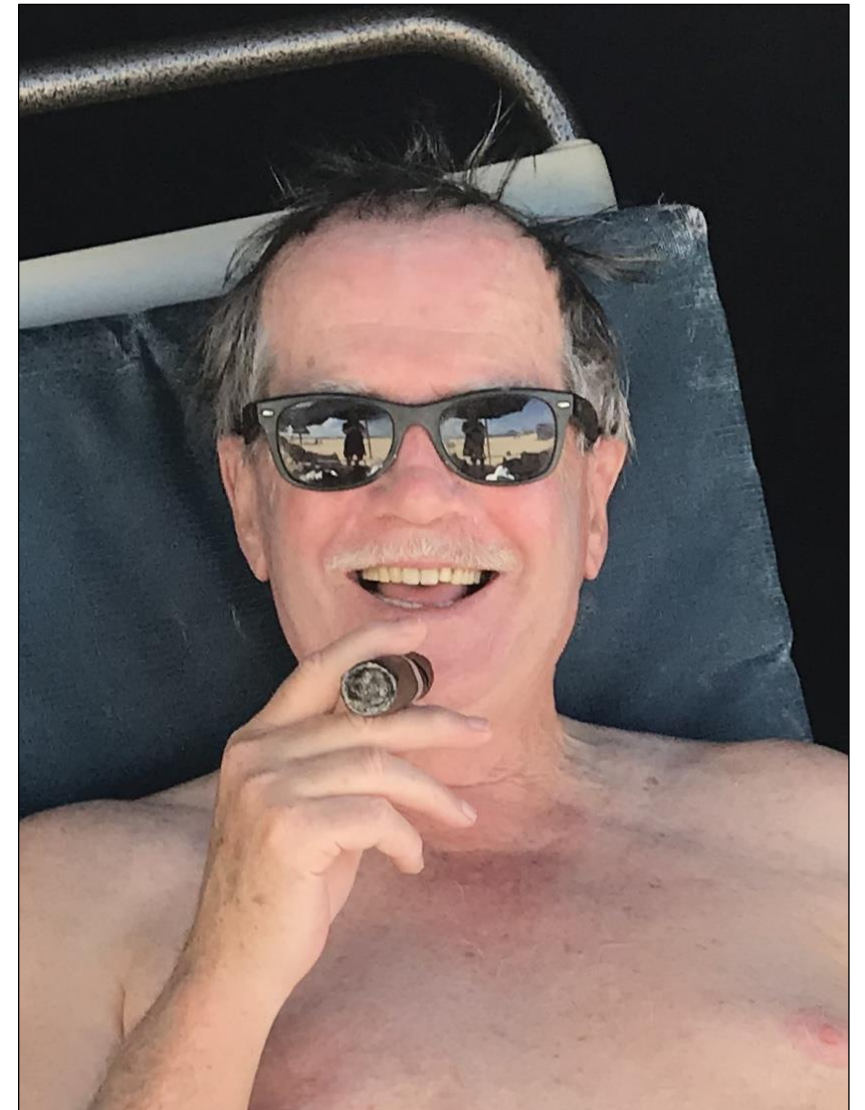
Eating, drinking, golfing, smoking cigars – you get the picture.

"He's very much a guy's guy," said Dr. Richardson. "But he's not a misogynist. He's always a gentleman."

"He's a real guy's guy," concurred Peter.

And as far as Wendy is concerned, that's just fine.

"We are such independent people," she said. "We found each other in our 40s and we both had our lives already. We had our friends and our careers, but we were able to bring our two lives



together while honoring each other's lives. We didn't have to be together every second. He could have his joys and his guy friends and I wasn't in the way of that. I gave him his freedom and he gave me my freedom. ... All these interests keep life spicy and fun."

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In talking with Tommy's friends and family members, one of the central themes that came up repeatedly was Tommy's endless desire to learn.

It's clear that his loved ones look up to Tommy as someone who never lost his thirst to acquire knowledge, even as the decades have passed.

"He's unique in the way he sees the world," Warren explained. "I really appreciate his outside-the-box thought process."

"He's probably read a thousand books," added Mike Sr. "He loves to read and then he loves to talk about what he just learned."

"He's a very inquisitive guy," said Nicole. "He loves to learn new things."

In particular, Tommy is interested in learning about people who are different than him.

"He really respects me as an individual," said Mito, a Princeton student who Tommy has taken under his wing. "He respects me as someone who might have a different perspective or different experiences. But he took it upon himself to learn more from me and to share experiences with me."

"I always admire how he's open to listening to people and how he loves to understand about different nationalities, different customs, people that live in different countries," added Mike Sr. "He loves hearing about where people live, what their skills are, what their customs are. He loves to learn."

And when it comes to learning, Tommy certainly has come a long way.

"School was not his thing," Wendy explained. "He's a curious person, an aggressive learner. He has his own style of finding things out. It's never-ending. It's another thing that attracted me to him when we got together."

In fact, when Wendy and Tommy first moved to Princeton, they attended lectures about a variety of topics that piqued their interest.

"I really admire his willingness to learn and to continue learning," Jose said. "The guy's nearly 70 years old and he's still in the process of wanting to be fluent in French."

"He's very explorative," Nick added. "He's a continual learner, whether it's a new book or a new golf technique. Even though he's up there in age, he has a beginner's mindset."

Indeed, two of the areas where Tommy has shown a thirst for knowledge over the years are improving his golf game and learning to speak French. His friends find these quests impressive and, in some ways, amusing.

"He's got to be the most *anal* golfer on earth," Leighton quipped. "He constantly thinks his game is getting better, and yet at 70 years old, he's been taking golf lessons."

"He's one of the smartest guys I've ever met," added Glenn.

"And most of it is self-taught. I mean, the guy learned to speak French. When I met him, he could barely speak English!"

It seems that all of Tommy's learning has paid off. After decades of combining his primary interests with a thirst to learn, Tommy appears to have found the magic formula.

"Guys have told him to teach a class at Princeton," Wendy said. And what class do they think Tommy should teach?

Wendy smiled.

"How to have a happy life."