

A celebration at 70

Part 2: Family and friends pay tribute to Tommy Williams, the man who overcame obstacles, persevered through health issues, and continues to thrive

Tommy and Wendy's story began as acquaintances at Synanon in 1977.

"We had been in common circles," she said, adding that they reconnected briefly when she bought insurance from him in 1989.

Five years later, Tommy and Wendy were invited to the same New Year's Eve party in Secaucus. It wasn't really meant to be a date, but sparks flew as the night went on.

"This was a very typical Tommy thing," Wendy recalled, beaming. "He asked me to dance right before midnight and then we kissed at midnight."

Over the next year, Wendy and Tommy had a romantic courtship despite living 100 miles apart. At the end of the year, they traveled to California with some friends.

"That sealed the deal," Wendy said.

They decided to move in together and chose Princeton as a halfway point between New York and Philly. They said "I do" in 1997 and all these years later, they're still going strong.

"I always had this good feeling about him," Wendy said. "I always just saw his sparkling blue eyes and his great smile and his upbeat way about him. We just have this chemical attraction. We're just so attracted to each other from when we met. It's been a wonderful formula."

From the beginning, Tommy and Wendy shared a connection over their love of music and their memories growing up as neighborhood kids in the 50s and 60s. And quickly they began to develop a mutual love of one particular city.

"We certainly share Paris as our romantic epicenter," Wendy said, noting they've visited Paris more than a dozen times, including for their honeymoon and again on their 20th anniversary.

Others have taken notice of the special connection between Tommy and Wendy and the way he has blossomed over the last 25 years.

"Wendy brought a whole new world to him," noted Jack.

"It's the golden period of his life," added Mike Sr. "It's meant everything to him. She has been like a ray of sunshine for Tom."



She completely made his life a very fulfilled life with purpose. She's just been a godsend for him."

"He's a wonderful, wonderful guy," Marilyn said. "I can't express how lucky I am that my daughter ended up being married to Tommy. The two of them together, it's a great combination."

While Wendy is the centerpiece of Tommy's life, his special relationships with friends and family stretch from coast to coast.

"He's very, very proud of his family," said Mike Sr. "In particular, he's so proud of

Melissa and what she's accomplished. And he loves being a grandfather."

"It's just spectacular," Wendy added. "It's very meaningful that we can be in August's life as he grows up and have this experience where Tommy can be so proud of Melissa as a successful, happily married, wonderful mother."

"Tommy takes a lot of pride in being a grandfather," added Peter. "And I know August thinks the world of him. Tommy takes a lot of time with August to show him skills, whether it's playing chess or teaching him how to be a man's man. He's showing him the way."

Other relatives feel a close bond with Tommy, as well.

"He's always kind of shown me the next step in life," said Mike Jr. "As a kid, he taught me how to play golf. I used to spend a lot of time at the cigar shop in Princeton. I was a teenager, hanging out with guys who were 2, 3 or 4 times my age, talking about politics and books. Tommy taught me how to hang and have conversations. And there have been times as I've grown older where I've gone to him for advice, and I'm immensely grateful for his help. He's my uncle, but he's really my friend."

"He calls me Ru Baby," added Ruth, smiling, "and I call him Brother Love."

And speaking of Tommy's special relationships...

"He's proud to be his mother's son," noted Mike Sr. "His mother was his girlfriend. He called her Elizabeth Taylor. He used to say, 'Elizabeth Taylor has nothing on you, mom.' They were best friends."

Even when it came to his career as an insurance salesman, Tommy developed plenty of life-long bonds.

"He had customers forever," Wendy said. "He's still getting commission checks from people he established relationships with. And he was very connected to the president of the company. They also had a wonderful relationship."

And then there's Tommy's bond with Mito. He welcomed Mito to Princeton, taught him how to drive, and invited him to the cigar shop, the golf course and to family functions, including holiday celebrations.

"They've involved me in their own family," Mito said. "Being an international student, if you get a person like Tommy who is willing to show you around, it really helps."

Tommy clearly has a history of going above and beyond in his friendships.

"I never had a great relationship with my dad, but Tommy is like a second father to me," said Jose, fighting back tears. "Through the years, Tommy brought me into his circle. We've built an emotional and caring relationship. He was always there for me, and I will always be there for him."

"When I had prostate cancer," Leighton added, "Tommy and Wendy quickly said, 'You're trying to renovate your home, so you can't stay there.' He and Wendy offered for my wife and me to stay with them, and I'm forever grateful."

So it comes as no surprise that Tommy has maintained friendships for 20 or 30 years – or in some cases, even longer.

"He's just an amazing human being," Glenn said. "He's helped me so much in my life become the person I am through his storytelling, his humor, his sensitivity and his compassion."

"If Tommy's your friend," added Leighton, "then he's your friend forever."

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One of the biggest obstacles that Tommy has overcome was his 2015 liver transplant. The wait. The wondering if a match would ever arrive. The procedure itself. And the ensuing recovery.

Yet, through it all, Tommy kept a healthy attitude, even when his body was anything but.

"He was a wonderful, wonderful patient," Marilyn said.

"I admire the fact that even through his medical challenges, he was always positive," Ru said. "He gives off that positive energy, even in challenging times. I think that's admirable. He tries to look at the cup as half-full."

Wendy confirmed that Tommy was generally in good spirits throughout that year despite the tough circumstances.

"It was not an unhappy time. It was not a struggle," she said.

"We just lived life together and got the most out of that year."

Yet, even as Tommy and Wendy took the medical issues in stride, it was tough for many of their friends and family to see Tommy so frail at one point, with no obvious answers in sight.

"Life is very short, as we all know," Nicole said. "And Tommy kept on trucking. I think a lot of people would've probably not fought as hard as he did."

There's a photo of Tommy on the golf course, looking as thin as ever. His brother used to say, half-jokingly, that there was a ghost behind Tommy that day.

"He went from that to gaining all the weight back and being healthy again," Mike beamed, "and here he is now at his 70th birthday. He managed to persevere through a lot of health issues. And I think that's a huge deal."

It was a lengthy battle, for sure. But for Tommy, the journey was merely a chapter in his inspiring story, not the whole book.

"Tommy and I talk about the gift of life," Wendy said. "He has another person's liver in him. He went through that whole process, but it does not define who he is – it's just a part of him."

"I'm getting choked up just thinking about it," Jose said. "How sick he looked at that time in 2014 and 2015. About a month ago, he and I were talking about the hurdles that he went through and overcame to now be this healthy 69-year-old man. He was basically knocking on death's door six years ago. That is one of the top reasons to celebrate this man."

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In reflecting on Tommy's first 70 years, it's fair to say that they have not always been smooth. But perhaps all the bumps in the road led Tommy to exactly where he's meant to be.

"He didn't have an easy life," Melissa began, "but he can take full credit for becoming the man that he is. He overcame a lot of adversity. It's just amazing – a story of resilience and persistence and determination. He reinvented himself. Very few people can do that. He's made it this far just on pure willpower, resilience and a passion to live a better life. He *should* celebrate. That's a pretty incredible achievement."



"I think Tommy has realized that you've got to count every day as a blessing," said Mike Jr. "At some point in his life, he realized that. And he started living as if he's lucky to be alive. And he's been tested, more times than he would've liked. But for him to be celebrating his 70th is really special."

In fact, most of Tommy's family and friends noted his ability to overcome hurdles as one of the many reasons to celebrate at 70.

"He loves life like a 12-year-old loves life. He sees no end to it," said Mike Sr. "When you look back at what he's gone through with his health, turning 70 is a big deal. There was a time six or seven years ago when we didn't know if he'd ever see 70. But he just took on his health issues because he loves life so much."

"He's shown such tremendous faith and resiliency," added Leighton. "There's no hill too high for him to climb. I've just got tremendous love for the brother."

As do Tommy's other friends. And, apparently, their children too.

"My son once said, 'If anything should happen to you or mom, I want Tommy to look after me,'" Warren recalled. "Tommy and I have been around the world together. We've experienced some pretty cool things in life. I look forward to many, many years of spending time with him."

"He deserves this," Glenn added. "The things he has done for other people in his life, he's one of these guys that, if he does something for you, he doesn't look for anything in return. He gets the gratification of helping someone and seeing it pay off. He's dedicated his life to his family, his friends, and he deserves more than just a 70th birthday. He's the most outstanding person I've ever met in my entire life. I'll always look up to you, Tommy, and you've meant so much to me and my family. I love you."

And now, here he is, celebrating a milestone birthday.

"He's in such a great place at 70 years old with so many accomplishments, so many people who love him, and so many people he loves," Wendy said.

"He's had the significant illness, but he hasn't compromised his life," Dr. Richardson said. "He still plays golf, still smokes cigars, still lives his life. He doesn't drink like he used to, of course, but I think as he reaches his 70th surrounded by family and friends, it just reminds him that he's still Tommy, that he can live his life."

So it's no wonder that so many people wanted to honor Tommy, the cool guy who in reality is so much more than that.

"The place where Tommy is today is an amazing milestone," Peter said. "Sometimes you have to take these milestones and appreciate them for what they are. I think Tommy is so young at heart that it's kind of hard to imagine him turning 70."

"It's a special year," Ru added. "We've had a hard year and a half with Covid, so Tommy's 70th is just symbolic of celebrating life. I'm excited to celebrate Tommy. Full speed ahead!"

"There are people in life that you want to be with, people that make you feel good, even if they're going through a lot," Marilyn explained. "I adore him, I respect him, and I love him. And I'm glad that my daughter is so happy and that they are so happy with each other."

That daughter, Wendy, gets the final word to describe the man she's loved for the last 25+ years – the best years of her life and the best years of his.

"Tommy has given me the most wonderful gift," Wendy said. "He gave me the gift of love and laughter and companionship and a first-class marriage. My relationship with him has always been about romance and passion and fun and laughter and love. He's just an extraordinary man. And after living with him for 25 years. I like him better every single day. He's the love of my life."