

Michael Paul Helm

July 2, 1967 – March 23, 2019

Son, Brother, Father, Friend, Artist, Creator, Teacher, Preacher, Counselor, Sinner, Survivor, Fighter, Faith-Filled Believer and the most wonderful, thoughtful, considerate, kind, loving, funny, caring and smiling man the world has ever known.

Michael began his journey in a small town in the northern suburbs of Chicago, Illinois called Elgin. He moved with his family to an even smaller town a little closer to the Wisconsin border called Cary when he was in elementary school, and he lived there until he was in his late teens, and in the general northern Chicago, Illinois suburb areas until re-meeting his wife in 2002 (they had been school-mates early on in Cary in middle and high school) and relocating out of Illinois, as many have done, to a little town of about 8,000 people called Delavan right over the Wisconsin border close to one of his favorite childhood mini-vacation spots, his beloved Lake Geneva, a town which is surrounded by water, parks and beauty, in the mid 2000's. Michael was one of 8 children, the third from the youngest. He has 3 older brothers, two older sisters and 2 younger sisters all of whom he adored, cherished, fought with, cried with, lived with, and who he; right up until the very end of his journey, never stopped taking care of or trying to make amends to, for all he felt he owed to them in one way or another.

As a child Michael was very big into little league, boy scouts (all the way to Life Scout, and he even got the gift of taking a cross county road trip with his youngest son and his mother to New Mexico to be there when a much beloved nephew took it to the last and final step and became an Eagle Scout), music, friends, BMX racing (his initials are MPH and his first BMX bike had the license plate "55 MPH" although he never really went by this speed limit) karate, comic books, super-heroes, and going 90 to nothing as fast as he could. He would have been diagnosed with ADHD were he a teenager today, but this was the late 1960's and early 1970's and there wasn't a name for someone who was as hyper as has he was at that time, it seemed he just could never stop moving.

In his early pre-teens, Michael wanted, as so many kids do, to "fit in" more than anything, and he found that he could with the aid of illegal substances and having as much fun as he could get away with. He started as most kids do trying cigarettes briefly (cancer sticks as he called them his whole life, ironically)

but never used them very long and soon discovered there were other things he could smoke or snort that would increase his popularity and fed his need for never being able to sit still. This next stage in his journey, as too many know, was fun for a while but it caused him to lose way more than he ever gained from it.

Michael was sent to rehabilitation for drug abuse when he was 15 and while it worked for a short time, he struggled to break free of the friends, the circle, the cravings and the endless cycles of partying and breaking the law and it wasn't long before he was back in to the life even deeper. He did complete high school during this time, in only 3 years in fact, but he had been turned out from our immediate family by our father and while he had stayed in our town, he mostly lived with friends through his graduation at just a month shy of 18 years old. This milestone for most brings new beginnings but in Michael's case it begins a time where he made some very bad choices; choosing drugs over most everything else, even ending up homeless at one point and living in a forest preserve in Illinois for a summer and very nearly into a pretty bad winter but even there he persevered, "I was a boy scout after all" he would say later, "and we made a pretty good little camp out there." He would talk and laugh about how he even created his very own solar shower something relatively unheard of in the late 1980's (he was pretty proud of that one!), and throughout this whole time he always worked and kept a job and even continued his education in community college. Michael ended up losing his family, many friends, losing trust from people he admired and looked up to (which he also tried to make amends for throughout the rest of his life) and ultimately lost his freedom entirely right before his 21st birthday and he spent just shy of the next 3 years in the prison system in Illinois. Michael made a vow and a choice in that place and time where your freedom is completely lost, where you only have two real choices, you either: A) break the cycle, turn your life around, walk away and never look back or B) give up and give in to the life and let it beat you, consume you and maybe eventually even kill you.

Michael chose A and the life that followed from here was one of tremendous faith, fun, laughter, tears, friendships, loves both great and fleeting – the gift of children, being a lifetime employee of a great company, being a mentor to others struggling with addiction, a role model to his boys as well as most all of their friends, and eventually to Michael even getting a pardon from the Governor of Illinois and his record of being a convicted felon expunged. This was one of his greatest accomplishments in a life filled with them and ending with his giving the ultimate gift of sight (no one who loved looking at the world and all it offered and saw in it only the beautiful even when most would say it sure can be ugly

sometimes would consider this anything but the ultimate gift) to two total strangers when his personal Lord and Savior called him to his forever home.

In the years' following Michael's release from his prison(s), he got sober, he got a job working for a friend of his who had started an unground cable contracting company with his family and became his own boss as an independent contractor naming his company Quality Performance (the truest words for every job he ever did) and he worked for this company right up until the end of his journey some 30 odd years later. This cable construction job was seasonal in the region we live because of the weather as you can't very well dig in the ground when it is 30 below zero outside and that ground is frozen solid, so being someone who never could sit still and needing to support himself and his family, Michael worked odd jobs throughout the winter months in all those 30 years. He delivered newspapers, pizzas, he worked in factories, he waited tables, he cleaned office buildings and people's homes, he painted houses, did indoor construction like drywall, painting and remodeling, he owned a flower business with a brother, a sister and his father (they had been estranged for many years and were ultimately able to rebuild a relationship that meant more to Michael than he could ever tell anyone, and lasted until our father left us in 2003). In short, Michael loved to work.

He loved to show his pride in his skills taking thousands of pictures, drawings and sketches of his job sites all through those years, training and coaching young friends his trade and giving them careers, he loved that he could make someone happy by giving them a beautiful rose on a crappy day, he loved filling people's tummies by serving them a good meal, giving people a clean living room when they came home from work, or just giving the lonely clerk at a convenience store a wink, a smile and a rose for no reason where he stopped to fill up his work van because he figured no one else had that day, or maybe ever had. He loved digging ditches the most though and giving people entertainment in their homes, and he always walked away from someone's yard with it looking better than when he arrived. It wasn't necessary to go so far above and beyond in even the simplest of entry level jobs, but it was how he lived his life – give all you got no matter what it is, and the rewards will come back to you tenfold! He believed it, lived it, and the truth of it was evident in everything he ever did.

Michael loved the beauty of the world; he collected a great many things such as eagles, white tigers, Chinese throwing stars, other karate weapons and ancient yin and yang art, coins, movie memorabilia, comic books and superhero memorabilia, he loved flowers and always had a bouquet of them sitting on

his kitchen table. He would say you don't need someone to buy you flowers, just buy them for yourself, smell the roses and glory in the beauty of them. He loved the ladies, was a tremendous flirt, he loved rainbows, sunrises and sunsets, laying on the beach, being near the ocean, a lake or just a stream, exploring nature, camping, fishing, mowing the lawn, driving, movies and TV shows about everything from Egypt and the Pharaohs and Kings of old to Nostradamus and magic. He loved music and had a collection of over 30,000 songs on his iTunes account and he would make "custom cut" CD's for his friends and loved ones. He would take the things he knew about them, their likes and dislikes, their musical styles, their visions of life, or love, of happiness or sadness, life events such as weddings or babies being born, or just random silliness and would spend hours piecing songs together, finding the right song's ending that would lead into the next one's intro, and so on and anyone who ever received one would agree and say "He just had a knack for figuring me out, and I'm not sure how he did it but those songs, well they just fit right where I am / or was at that point in time", or "gosh he really paid attention when I said I loved that song, or that artist." Michael got so much joy from making people happy, from digging just a little deeper than the surface to see what people really needed or what made them who they were. He never judged anyone, he never carried grudges, he was wronged in his life sure, and there are very few in the world who could say they haven't been, but he forgave and forgot always. Choosing to live his life by the bible verse that says, "Judge Not Lest Ye Be Judged Blind." Jesus immediately goes on to say: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you." (Matthew 7:1-2)

He loved Jesus and God and he always had a prayer, a thought or a "word of wisdom" for anyone and everyone. He never claimed to be perfect, and knew he was a sinner but never doubted when he gave his life and his heart fully to the Lord, that he was saved from a lifetime in eternal Hell, even knowing that for a great many years of his life, he had lived it here on earth. He was never a great reader or speller, but he tried, and he loved writing down words of encouragement, clever sayings, beautiful poems, or phrases that were meaningful, beautiful, inspirational, or just plain frivolous. He wrote these "words of wisdom" as he called them on everything. Notebooks, his bible, his grocery receipts, his work orders, even his toilet paper when he got sick later in his life and spend a great deal of time in the bathroom. To him it didn't matter what it was written on, it was that it was written down and could be shared with a friend, his family, his sons, his wife or later when he found himself divorced; a lover, his mother or just a stranger down on his luck asking for a helping hand at a stop light on one of his daily and sometimes weekly drives for work. He also loved making collages of random pictures, or clippings

from magazines, or books (yes he would admit cutting up a book if some string of words struck him and it would be easier to clip the words out than rewrite them because then nobody would be able to read it because his handwriting was so bad...). These would usually have a theme like "Time" and would be filled with pictures of watches, clocks, words that spoke about wasting time, losing time, time management, keeping time, time to move on, time to change, time to fly, or simply time to pass on.

In 2003 Michael became a father, and his greatest joy to date became that baby. A boy named Seth, and he was followed by Michael's next greatest joy, a brother a few short years later in 2006 and his name is Preston. Michael loved music, and his favorite band of all time was the rock band Rush. If you are not familiar with their music, or the band, they had a very popular album released right near the end of March 1976, 43 year almost exactly before Michael passed away, entitled 2112. This became Michael's favorite album of all time and his personal "number". So much so that no one was the least surprised when his son Seth was born on June 12, and his son Preston was born on September 21. 2112 even in the birth dates of his children...you don't normally get to pick those dates as most parents know, but Michael had the "force" as he liked to call it and when he said he had prayed on it, that he had spoken it, that it would be and of course, it just was.

Talking to them boys, teaching them, telling them stories about his life, about the roads he travelled and the paths you chose and how they can make or break a man, acting like a kid with them at comic book movies (no one loved movie theater popcorn with loads of butter and M&M peanut candies more than Mikey) like the Avengers, what to do and what not to do in everything you do in life. Glorifying in their victories, praising them in their triumphs, crying with them in their tragedies. These were some of his greatest moments, and knowing that through God's own miracle he would live through them forever, that they would carry on his name, his blood, his heritage and his legacy even when he didn't realize it at the time that it wouldn't be that long until he would have to leave them.

The physical labor that Michael did was very demanding and hard work, and he suffered from multiple broken bones, a broken back, aches and pains but from the early 2000's to 2012 there was a different kind of pain. It radiated down near his lower abdominal left side and never quite went away. In December of 2012 after nearly a decade of dealing with it, working through it and trying to ignore it, he realized something must be wrong. Countless doctor visits, specialists and test followed until on the 12th of that month Michael was given the news of his greatest challenge yet. Cancer the doctors said, in

the bottom portion of his colon very near the rectum and a pretty big tumor, no less. As he had done with every challenge in his life to that point, he simply said "Okay, what do I, the doctors, and God need to do?" It was Stage 3 they said, and would be operable but colorectal cancer is tough, the survival rate is usually 2 to 3 years, but Michael's doctor said "Mike, I can give you 5 years, but I can't give you 10 years." Michael said, "Bring it! I will fight here and now, yes, maybe harder than I ever dreamed I could, but I have small boys, so young, and they need me. I'm not going anywhere just yet." This began the first 3½ years of endless surgeries, chemotherapy, radiation, medication and praying harder and more feverishly than he had ever done before. One month after Michael's diagnosis of cancer, his wife of 10 years told him she couldn't take dealing with children, disease and this new "life" that had just been dropped on her and she chose to leave him and his children to spare herself the struggles. So, in pure Michael fashion he faced a judge at 44, not for the first time in his life, with stage 3 cancer and said, "my boys need me, I'm their best and only hope and I'm not leaving them anytime soon, cancer be damned." The judge agreed and granted him a divorce, custody and primary placement of his then 9 and 6-year-old sons.

Those first 3½ years, he worked as much and as often as he could, he fought, prayed and gave everything he had to push cancer away and stop it from winning. The boys thrived in Michael's care, albeit becoming a strange and wonderful but totally different kind of little family unit. Michael worked every day that he could, he kept up all his hobbies and raised those boys the very best he could under tremendously difficult circumstances. In July 2015, after a whole lot of fighting, the news came that none of us, least of all Michael, wanted to hear. The cancer had spread to his lungs and became what is known as Stage 4 Terminal. I, his next youngest sister, walked away from my own personal life and made the decision to move back home to southeast Wisconsin (where I hadn't lived in 30 years) to help my brother, who through my words here if in no other way, I can only hope to show that he meant more to me than anyone else in the world. I vowed to help him, to stay with him to the very end and to raise his boys when the inevitable happened and cancer won.

For the last 3 years and 4 months of Michael's life, I was with him and this gift was one I will never be able to repay anyone, ever. He trusted me to do the right thing, to eventually take care of the two most important people in the world to him, and I am doing so now as their temporary, and ultimately, as their permanent guardian. We walked through these last 3 years together, through more chemotherapy, more radiation, more medication than anyone should ever have to take. Hours upon hours he spent in

the bathroom, his quality of life diminishing daily and yet through it all; always that smile, those wonderful “words of wisdom”, a song, a prayer, a gift for no reason, working, living, loving, pleasing, teasing and never a moment of not being in constant pain. His cancer doctor always told him that “it won’t be the cancer that takes your life, Mike, it will be your heart that just eventually gives out when it can’t take the pain, pressure, struggle, battle and constant taxing weight of all it had endured any longer”, and he was absolutely right because on a beautiful early spring day in late March 2019, Michael’s heart finally said enough.

He left us at 9:37 p.m. on March 23, 2019 and I and my oldest sister were with him at that moment along with one of his sons, his pastor and his wife, and a lifelong friend and his wife. He looked so at peace, so beautifully serene and I knew at that moment that he loved Heaven more clearly than I have ever known anything in my life. At 11:30 p.m. that night, back home at Michael’s house, his youngest boy finally sleeping from sheer exhaustion and grief, my sister and I sat in the living room crying and waiting for the arrival of some of our extended family when my telephone rang with the most amazing news one could ever hope to receive at a moment like that. Michael had been an organ donor for years, probably not even remembering which license renewal time he had said “yes” to the offer, but after battling cancer for nearly 7 years, it never occurred to any of us that any part of his body hadn’t just been completely ravaged by this horrible disease. Boy were we in for a shock as a wonderfully kind, sweet voiced woman from the Lion’s Eye Bank of Wisconsin proceeded to tell us that while she hated to call us at such a horrible time, but maybe what she had to tell us would ease our grief in some small way. Michael’s eyes, so beautiful and full of love for all they saw, were absolutely perfect and he was more than an ideal candidate for corneal transplants, to one or maybe even two people, and if we would agree...someone, somewhere would wake up in a few days after maybe suffering a tragic accident, or a debilitating disease, or even a lifetime of being sightless and would see the world again, or maybe for the very first time.

Our answer was without pause, question, or even a moment’s hesitation, a resounding YES!

The weeks that followed were like no other, and only those who have lost loved ones or family too early can truly understand; filled with endless paperwork, changes, grief, joy, pain, struggle, strife, sadness and then moments of absolute clarity realizing wait...Michael would carry on, Michael did carry on, he would persevere no matter what! The letter that made it all worth it and put it all into perspective or as Michael would say gave us “a beautiful visual masterpiece” came on April 16, 2019 telling us that

Michael's gift gave two people the beauty of seeing the world once more. Someone in Kenya, and someone in Chile. Michael never traveled outside the United States while he was alive, but today he sees the jungles and the rawest of nature in South America and the ultimate amazing land of South Africa. He sees the world once more through the lives and sight of these two people forever more. I hope Michael's story is one of inspiration, of never giving up or giving in, that it might change someone's decision to not even consider organ donation. I hope that anyone reading this will "see" a beautiful soul, who so unselfishly lived his life and ultimately, his death.

His family, his friends, his loved ones young and old, are so grateful to this wonderful organization who dedicate themselves, their entire lives in fact, to giving and preserving the gift of sight. Michael saw the world in a more loving, caring, magical light than anyone we have ever known and we can only hope those whose sight has been restored, or given, through Michael's gift will continue his legacy and will "look" upon the world as he did; as a beautiful, magical, colorful, wonderful glorious place that he was always so happy to see.