



Michael F. Licata

*St John Chrysostom once said "Those who instruct many unto justice will shine like stars for all eternity".*

These individuals whom we respect are kind to us and generous with their friendship. They inspire us to emulate them. For me that person was Michael Licata.

Mike, born on May 16, 1926 at 37 Efner Street to Sicilian immigrants who came to America from the towns of Licata and Caccamo. The family later relocated to 40 Busti Avenue. Mike attended PS # 2 and McKinley High School. In 1944, while in high school, the United States Army drafted and trained Mike to be a tail gunner on a B-29. However much to Mike's chagrin the war ended before he had an opportunity to go overseas and apply his acquired skills, yet his parents were delighted.

Returning home from the service, he finished high school, received his diploma and taking advantage of the G.I. Bill attended Buffalo State College. During college, Mike cut clams at the stand next to Andy's Café on the Lower Terrace. At that time I was 9 years old and lived in the building that housed Andy's. That's where I met Mike. I was immediately taken in by his infectious smile and warm personality. He was liked and respected not only by the neighborhood kids but also by the Damon Runyon characters, who each night, inhabited Andy's at the corner of Lower Terrace and West Genesee Street..

On summer evenings, my friends and I played baseball until the street lights turned on signaling it was time to go home. On the way, we would pass the clam stand and pester Mike for a handful of oyster crackers. With a laugh he never refused our request. Mike talked

with us and humored us with stories and anecdotes.

In 1951 Mike graduated from BSC, earning a degree in Industrial Arts. After graduation he worked as a substitute teacher in the Buffalo Public School system and took the exam for the Buffalo Fire Department. He was appointed to the Fire Department 1953.

In 1955 a teaching position opened at Bishop Timon High School. Mel Palano, a friend of Mike's, and the physical education and legendary coach at Timon, recommended Mike for the position. He was hired to teach Mechanical Drawing, and later he also taught religion and physical education.

The same year I transferred from Canisius H.S. to Bishop Timon. Both Mike and I were starting the school year at a new school, he as a teacher and me as a student. On the first day of school we drove together in his green Pontiac. After we traveled a few miles making small talk, Mike turned to me and said " Joe when we are in school, remember you have to call me Mr. Licata." From that point I always did and we never let on that we personally knew each other.

Arriving at school I settled into my new surroundings and discovered that mechanical drawing was on my class schedule with Mr. Licata as instructor. Students scrambled to their respective classroom and anticipated the arrival of the instructor. The door of the classroom opened and Mr. Licata entered, placed his briefcase on the desk and without a word slowly rolled up his sleeves of the pristine white shirt he was wearing. He introduced himself to the class, described the course and proceeded to talk for a few minutes. He was an imposing figure, impeccably dressed, dark complexion and strong handsome features. He looked more like a middleweight contender than a teacher. At that moment I sensed that my fellow students did not think it wise to test his authority.

He told the class the he was also a firefighter, adjusting his schedule to the night shift so that he would be free to teach at Timon during the day. There were times when Mike would come to class straight from a fire and still look as sharp as a tack.

*(Continued on page 5)*

Within a few weeks Mike had won the hearts and respect of his students. Everyone liked him and his teaching method. He taught us more than just mechanical drawing, he taught us life skills. His lessons were often interjected with discussions on current events, politics, sports or anything that interested his students. We felt comfortable in talking about anything with Mr. Licata.

After graduation I bid goodbye to South Buffalo and nestled back into the lower West Side beginning my journey to adulthood. On this journey, I now realize, the road was paved by the love and guidance of my parents and by a few other special people, including Mike Licata.

Mike, a lifelong resident of the Westside, worked at the firehouse on Jersey Street and Plymouth Avenue. Often, while driving up Jersey Street, I hoped to see Mike camped on the bench in front of the fire house. When I did see him he would pop off the bench, come over to the car and we would talk. Sometimes he would invite my children to come in the firehouse to see the trucks.

Mike continued to teach at Timon for twenty-seven years while working with the Fire Department. He reached the rank of lieutenant opting not to achieve a higher level because it would interfere with his teaching at Timon.

Mike married Theresa Barry from County Cork, Ireland. They raised nine children in a house on Lafayette Ave. The house was a double that Mike had renovated to also accommodate his mother and father. That was Mike!

After I moved from the West Side to North Buffalo I seldom saw Mike. Then one summer day, circa 1980 my wife and I took our four children to Crystal Beach. We walked along the beach and while passing a row of beach houses, I noticed a man waving at us. I thought nothing of it. On our return walk the man again waved. So I approached the house. To my surprise it was Mike. He insisted we join him for lunch. So we spent the afternoon enjoying Mike's company at his self-built beach house. We reminisced about many things. It was then that he told he had been diagnosed with leukemia. The disease had restricted his work but it was not going to beat him. His positive attitude and his cheerfulness impressed me, yet I was crushed. We said our goodbyes and I wished him well. Walking away I thought about Mike and what an inspiration he was to his students. He made a difference in

our lives. I wish I had told him that. He died not long after in 1982, he was 56 years old.

*(Excerpt from Bishop Timon Alumni Newsletter September 1982)*

*Mike's life touched the lives of thousands of young men who attended Bishop Timon High School. His influence will never be measured because it is beyond measurement. Perhaps the greatest contribution was the example of his life. Mike was a good person and this goodness radiated in this whole life. He was an outstanding example of a Christian educator. He was "strong in faith" and this was very obvious to his students. He was a great example to all of them, all of the time and especially in his struggle with cancer. In recognition of his work with the Franciscans at Timon he was made an affiliate or honorary member of the order. On October 4th, 1979 he received the Franciscan Habit.*



Lt. Michael Licata at the Jersey Street Fire House