

Goodbye Old Friend

Unfortunately, the responsibilities of life have gotten in the way and I am deeply sorry I cannot be there today. Everyone has a Gene story, so I wanted to take a moment to tell you all some quick stories about what Gene meant to me and how he could touch someone's life. Gene was the equivalent to a Grandfather in racing to me.

When I was 5 years old, I was headed to my first NEMA race at Monadnock. For me, it was going to be exciting to see different racecars and a different track than a Long Island racetrack. Four and half hours later we arrived at Monadnock. All that pent-up energy was for naught because we arrived at an empty track and empty parking lot. In my father's typical fashion we got there a few hours early because, that was just Dad's way!

After sitting in that parking lot for what I thought was an eternity, a motorhome rolled in towing a little open trailer with a storage box that said 45 Dumos Desire on the side. Sitting on that trailer was the prettiest red racecar you ever saw. It was an Edmunds chassis with a Volkswagen engine, and just like the storage box on the trailer, it said 45 Dumo's Desire on the wing. That was the first time I met Gene and Marilyn Angelillo. Drew won the race that night...and I became an instant fan.

I became such a devoted fan that Dad had to chastise me one night in the grandstands at Hudson. I was about seven years old and threw a temper tantrum because Jim Lowery Jr. beat Drew to the line!

Gene was so generous. In those early years, Dad raced on a shoestring and Gene kept us supplied with used tires. He was so giving, Dad would just say, "Go to Gene's trailer and see what he's got." When NEMA Banned the Mazda Rotary and Grandfathered in my Dad's car in the late 80's, Gene approached my Dad and said, "buy my car." Dad said he couldn't afford it, Gene said, "Tell ya what, I'll lease it to ya!" It was Gene being Gene, and that generosity wasn't just with us, it was with everyone. There were so many time's he would give or loan out his own part's, tool's or even crewmen to help others. He was a true competitor who wanted to beat you at your best.

Fast forward to the summer of 1996. Pete, Dad and I were working on the family car at the house. The phone rang and it was Gene. He was President of NEMA at the time. He heard I was announcing go-kart races and a few TQ races. Chris Romano and Dick Monahan had prior engagements, and that weekend was the Wen Kelley/Brian Caruso Memorial at Seekonk. My dream was to announce races and be on TV so I cannot begin to explain what this opportunity meant to me and the fact that I never asked Gene if I could announce NEMA races, he asked me. That spoke volumes to me. He watched my brother and I grow up and had confidence in my ability. Keith Bothelho won the race that night, but back in the pits Gene was the first person who wrapped his arm around me and gave me a big kiss on the cheek. You'd have thought I had won the race!

A few years later I went off to college to chase my dream of being on Television. Gene always said, "You can do it. Derek I've heard ya, you're just as good as those guys on TV!" Just like protective parents, Gene and Marilyn always said if you need anything you call.

I've never told anybody this story but while I was in college I'd announce NEMA races to make extra money. One race weekend, as I got paid at nights end. I was putting my little yellow envelope in my pocket, Gene tugs on my shirt sleeve and says "come here." He pulls me aside, pulls a wad of cash out of his pocket, peels off about double of my pay and say's "take this, you did a good job tonight." Knowing in his old Italian way, he would have been insulted if I didn't take it. (I never told him this, but that pay bought one of my schoolbooks and paid my electric bill for the month) He said to me, "You keep doing what you're doing. I love you"

That was the tone for every conversation we would ever have since that night. Anytime we would ever talk, somewhere in the conversation he would always say, "You keep doing what you're doing, I love you." That was the amazing part about Gene. His words were so simple but ran so deep, He gave people confidence in themselves, he gave people the ability to believe in themselves. It was infectious. After I moved down South Gene and Marilyn believed in me so much they would fly me up to announce big events or emcee Banquets. When we won our first race it was Gene and Drew we had to beat. On the track it was a photo finish at the line, in the pits Gene and Drew cried tears of joy for us.

How many laughs did we have with Gene over the years? It was commonplace Gene and Marilyn would throw an after-party at the Banquet. It was entertainment watching him "hold court!" with club members young and old. They would circle around and listen to his stories for hours. The older members would be reminiscing while the younger ones were hanging on his every word about the crazy things they did back in the day! Gene had fun at everything he did, including life.

As I write the words and reminisce on a man who touched my life so deeply, I can hardly hold back the tears. Gene didn't die from medical reasons, I like to think he died of a broken heart. He loved Marilyn so much he was willing to go anyplace to be with her, including Heaven. After Marilyn's passing Gene would still "hold court" at the track or the banquet. But you could tell there was a little pain that crept out from behind his eyes because he missed her so much. And yes Gene I will admit part of me is crying for my own selfish reasons that I'm going to miss you but it's also bittersweet and happy tears because you're together with your beloved Marilyn. We'll all be faced with the unfortunate reality that the pits are going to be a lot different without you around. We can talk about his records in NEMA, but those stats speak for themselves. It's more fun to talk about and remember the person. It's these memories that we have that allow Gene to live forever in all of us.

"I'll keep doing what I'm doing Gene, I love you." Derek Pernesiglio