

Eulogy for Michael Arthur Armstrong

Delivered by Keith Armstrong :17/10/22

Thank you all for being here today. My name is Keith Armstrong, Michael's son. I am speaking today on behalf of my sister Patricia and our extended families here and in Australia. My words will then be complemented by those of Dad's beloved grandchildren, Thomas (incl for Miriam) and Kai. I pay special tribute to Kai who travelled with my partner Julie from Australia a few days ago but caught COVID and cannot be here today. Julie and Kai you are with us in spirit.

Maybe unexpectedly, I would like to begin this reflection upon Dad's life and legacy with a quote from the words of a popular song that I grew up with during the 1980s called the 'Living Years'. It's one of the few songs that could ever make me cry. As a then somewhat rebellious young man, I learnt a powerful lesson, in part, from that song, about how to love well. It tells the tragic, but maybe, all too frequent story of a middle-aged man, who has become estranged from his father, and missed out on telling him that he loved him: – The last verse of the song goes as follows ..

*I wasn't there that morning
When my father passed away*

*I didn't get to tell him
All the things I had to say*

*But I think I caught his spirit
Later that same year
I'm sure I heard his echo
In my baby's newborn tears
I just wish I could have told him in the living years*

I will forever be grateful that I, and definitely we as a family, never made that mistake during our Dad's Living Years. We all told, and showed Dad that we loved him constantly. He knew we all adored him to the moon and back; and even though, in the end, as in the song, we weren't physically there when he passed away, he had heard from us all what he needed to know. I know that he left our world in perfect peace - that his job was lovingly done.

Dad was born in 1933, and ultimately taken from us 3 weeks ago. So much happened between those two dates, there is really no way to sum up the life he led in a single speech, but I'm going to do my very best.

Dad was the best, kindest father one could ever hope for - an all-round wonderful person, a man of endless quiet humour, a fully-engaged citizen and an old school gentleman focused by his deep Christian faith.

Born the only son of Arthur and Doris Armstrong in Mansfield, he began work in the local hosiery industry in 1949. In 1951 he enlisted into the RAF, working predominantly as a statistician, rising to the role of Sergeant. The RAF took him all over the world (30 countries for 'duty and pleasure' he liked to say) with long postings in Singapore and Hong Kong and also active service in Malaya.

His passion for volunteering for the benefit of others was evident from the outset. He established and led a Leper colony welfare group in Singapore, and a youth group in a Refugee Village in Hong Kong. He also established and led several Christian youth groups, both in Kowloon/Hong Kong and in the UK; and clocked up 13 years teaching in Sunday schools and 6 years of preaching.

In 1959, he took a job as social secretary at the Methodist Holiday Hotel, Bodlondeb Castle in Llandudno, where he met our beautiful Mum/Dorothy, whom we lost in 2020. He spoke of his love for her at first sight, and a year later they were married. Their bond was powerful, and it embraced and nurtured our world as children through everything they did and stood for together. Everything they did was grounded by their deep Christian faith, their selfless love for others, their passion for teaching and their drive to

sow the seeds for a better world for all. Mum and Dad were together in flesh for 60 long and happy years.

In 1963 Dad's passion for social change framed his move into the probation service, where he ultimately became a senior officer. Very early on, he began to focus his energies working in the conciliation area, primarily focusing on the welfare of children during divorce court cases – because he saw the need for improvement in this process. His proudest achievement in his professional life, echoed by the many letters we've received, and in his papers, was the setting up in 1981, against quite some resistance, of the In-Court conciliation service of the Essex Family Courts Service – ultimately a highly successful alternative to families having to fight judicial court actions over the custody and welfare of their children. This new service removed judges and law-based edicts in favour of mediation, through building compromise between the estranged couples – prioritising the rights and care of their children. Through this innovative work, Michael became well respected by local judiciary and legal teams. Indeed, at his leaving party from the service in 1995 a county judge described the in-court

conciliation service as “the single most important event in family work in this region probably ever.” At that stage under Michael’s watch more than 80% of cases leading to serious disputes over the children were being settled without judge’s interventions. That service became a beacon and inspiration for all the subsequent advances in family justice – and is now part of a national framework. The judge continued, “and this achievement was entirely down to the efforts of one man – Michael Armstrong”. (I can hear Dad now patiently reminding me that he worked as a team player, and so he’d definitely want me to also pay tribute to all those who worked with him and believed in that incredible project).

All reports corroborate that Dad was much loved by his colleagues in the conciliation service, being “able, intelligent, hard-working, extremely knowledgeable, fair and committed – something he also expected of his staff” by the way! His reputation was of absolute loyalty to his team, and a champion of the underdog. One colleague noted, “Staff would go to a Senior Probation Officer colleague if they wanted telling what to do, and would go to Mr. Armstrong if they wanted to be helped to see what to do”.

Dad was also a proud union man – and active at high level in NAPO (The National Association for Probation Officers) as an indefatigable influencer and innovator for many years. He was a non-confrontational negotiator who worked from the inside, using his quizzical humour to disarm and reduce tension – as an effective prelude to making change. He apparently enjoyed the intricacies of the rulebooks and abiding by them (which I sometimes found a challenge in our home life!!). Now as we all know, speaking truth to power requires courage and can come with a cost, and so Michael found himself from time to time in disagreement with management - something that his career trajectory ultimately suffered for. And you know what, I'm really proud of him for that - because I know that he was a profoundly ethical man with 20:20 vision of the right way things should be done – in this case to protect the most vulnerable in society.

Many of those from the Probation service have sent wonderful letters, and some are in the congregation today – so thank you for documenting and honouring Dad's professional legacy.

If I could describe my Dad to you in only a few short words, it would be 'generous to a tee'. This was probably best epitomised by the way in which he patiently nursed Mum through her long twilight years – fulfilling 200% to

her his marriage vows to honour their bond in sickness and health, until death do us part. (At the time he promised “with God’s help I will,” and he noted proudly to us, with God’s help I have). And he never complained, despite the physical and mental toll it took on him. It was profoundly important to him to do the right thing by Mum, and ‘boy did he deliver’.

As noted before, he had a wonderful sense of humour which was enjoyed by everyone who knew him – dry, wry, prodding, subtle, deadpan, self-deprecating. You didn’t always know if he was pulling your leg, as he put it, but he probably was.

We also thought it a little hilarious that for his nights out with Mum, Dad would don a tartan kilt and sporran and go Scottish Country Dancing each week– something they did for years. His great humour is such that he even announced he had a free kilt to give away as he read Mum’s Eulogy in 2020. Incidentally the kilt and sporran are still available (please don’t all rush at once!)

Dad often lived life to the fullest and wasn't afraid to show the world who he really was. We were all a little shocked at the age of 75 when he became an inaugural member of the Colchester ‘Street Pastors’– now an international group that acts as a calming and supportive force for young

people out on the town enjoying the night life. Ironically this role required him to be out on the town way later than I could physically manage by that stage each week – often till 4am. He was featured heavily in newspaper articles of the time and is quoted as saying – “At Castle Methodist, churchgoers who go there on Sunday mornings never meet revelers who walk past on Saturday nights. We have no contact with people in the town, and it is important to make the point of saying we actually care about them”. He went on to say, “We don’t see the world through black and white. The role is not about preaching heaven and hell but one of caring, listening and helping”. It is reported that his calm, friendly persona enabled him to chat to the young people with ease. “They see me as a grandad figure”, he said smiling.

The street pastor’s handbook from the time lists core competencies needed by volunteers, and they resonate with me as the man that Dad was – emotional self-awareness, good communication skills, capability to develop relationships, ability to understand and accept differences, team player, adaptable, tolerant, disarming and energetic. It’s as if he wrote the script! We have street pastors in Brisbane where I live, and a friend noted – “Oh

yes, they're great – they save lives that service do... just being there for our kids”.

And so - he was also always there for us as kids too, as he subsequently has been for our own children. Patricia and I remember Dad in our youth as patient chauffeur, great driving instructor, erector of tents in gales and rainstorms, sandcastle maker extraordinaire, leader of the best and most innovative party games at our birthdays, and enthusiastic participant in our games, puzzles, and crafts - something he later did extensively with the grandchildren who somewhat idolised him. In later years he was an advisor in matters such as finance, a patient university theses typer and a weekly letter writer to us both. As children, teenagers and adults we always felt safe, secure and loved by both Mum and Dad.

Mum and Dad shared a deep love for gardening – he always referred to himself as the undergardener, and to the very end he was out digging, dead-heading and weeding to keep their garden true to Mum's wishes.. Despite the fact he knew the family house would be sold following his death, he has asked to have some of his ashes spread in that garden he loved so much, where he had such a connection with Mum.

Dad was a committed Christian and stalwart of this church for 50 years. Yet his tolerance always allowed him a place in his world for other religions and beliefs - ultimately for example accepting my own choice to choose a life led by other ethical and moral philosophies. And he was also supportive of my partner Julie's engagement with Buddhism. He was naturally overjoyed that Patricia continued in his faith. We see much of Dad and Mum in our own children, and we thank him for loving our partners (Julie and Mark) and children (Kai, Miriam and Thomas (and more recently his partner Anna who is with us today) so much.

I have lived in Australia for 35 years, so our family's visits have been fleeting, and never long enough. So, as I come to the end of this tribute to Dad, I also want to say a very special thankyou to Patricia and Mark Armstrong-Read and their family - who have shown incredible enduring love and care for Dad , through his good times, and his many health trials and tribulations. Patricia's family were always there for him – and for that he was – and we will be, eternally grateful.

In closing, I want to thank you all once again for being here today with our families as we prepare to say a final goodbye to Dad. All of the support, encouragement, and words of comfort over the past days from friends and family alike, many of whom are with us today, will always be remembered.

And so, returning to the words of that song that I began with: I am sooo very glad that Da tught us how to love well, and that we told him how much we loved and cherished him, unconditionally – in his **living years**.

Finally, now we want to say goodbye to you, Dad. You were such a special person to so many, and your legacy will live on in the beautiful memories you leave for all of us. We will always love and remember you. Goodbye Dad.

Additional Eulogy for Michael Arthur Armstrong: Delivered on behalf of Kai Armstrong :17/10/22

I would like to reflect on the beautiful life Grandpa led, and the meaning and purpose he fulfilled over his 89 years of being alive.

I am so grateful for having Grandpa in my life for 17 years. He was the most kind and loving man I ever met. I don't think or at least don't remember a time where I have had a single argument with him or him ever being even remotely angry at me. He loved to tell stories. He told me about working as a street pastor at 12 o'clock at night helping all the drunk people stay somewhat on their feet. By the way he was in his 70s doing this as a volunteer. That is remarkable. He told me about how all the other soldiers he was working with in Singapore in the RAF were sitting around doing nothing while he was out there volunteering at a leper colony. He lived an extremely meaningful and purposeful life by contributing so much of his time to help others in need. He treated everyone he knew with a great deal of love and care. I am grateful for Grandpa being in my life for 17 years. He has had an extremely positive impact on me, and I am always going to remember him. I love you Grandpa and I will always love you.

**Additional Eulogy for Michael Arthur Armstrong
Delivered By Thomas Armstrong-Read :17/10/22**

Firstly, thank you everyone for coming. Whilst it's incredibly sad that Grandpa has passed away, I want to celebrate him today. Grandpa was an incredibly joyful man, and I'm sure that many of the great memories that you have of him are of his sense of humour, and ability to crack a joke regardless of the situation. I just want to share some of my personal memories today.

My mum always used to make incredible cakes for Miriam and I growing up. Fairy castles (not for me!), sports cars and pirate ships all featured over the years. It was Grandpa's (albeit self-appointed!) job to make a tray of sandwiches that were perfectly matched to the theme out of just bread and vegetables, so we'd always have 20 mini vegetable pirate ships that nobody really wanted to touch as they looked so good!

We used to go to Grandma and Grandpa's every summer for about a week at a time, and undoubtedly the highlight of this was having a carpentry project with Grandpa. I particularly remember making things for the garden such as bird boxes, bird feeders, bird tables, bird baths, bird everything. His main job was probably ensuring that I didn't chop my arm off with a saw or a power tool, Mum and Dad wouldn't have been very happy! Building lego together, beach days and mowing the lawn were all common when we were staying over!

But when I look back and think about all of the things that I've done with Grandpa, the time that I'm most grateful for was when my girlfriend and I travelled down to surprise him over the Jubilee bank holiday. It was so nice to have time to properly catch up, cook for him and have a laugh together. We took him on a trip to Walton-on-the-naze, where he insisted on buying me an ice cream, as he would, as grandparents love to treat their grandkids! It was a great weekend, and I'm so glad that I had the privilege of introducing Anna to him properly, which I know he was so excited about.

When Grandpa and I used to talk about dating in the past, it sounded very different. He used to call it 'courting' and I remember that Grandpa loved to talk about how he met grandma like this: "I was working over summer on the doors in a hotel, and when Grandma walked in, I just went wowwwwwww". I love the passion that he still felt so many years later when reminiscing over that day, and what a marriage grandma and grandpas was.

It wasn't until I got much older that I really learnt to appreciate the core values that Grandpa had. Without even knowing it, he showed me the true meaning of loving your wife "in sickness and in health" and always wanted the absolute best for Grandma, regardless of the sacrifice or his own poor health. Now being in my own relationship I appreciate what those vows mean all the more, and if I become even half the husband Grandpa was, I reckon I'm doing pretty well.

And on the 27th of September when Grandpa passed away, I sent my mum this message:

“I’m so sorry. He was an incredible man and I’m so grateful to have him as my Grandpa, we lost a legend last night”

And it’s true, Grandpa was an incredible man who I have so many fond memories of. He always knew how to smile and crack a joke through the worst of times. He had a great faith and I know that he’s dancing in Heaven right now.

I think on the 27th of September, not only we, but the world lost a legend that I’m so grateful to have been able to call my Grandpa.