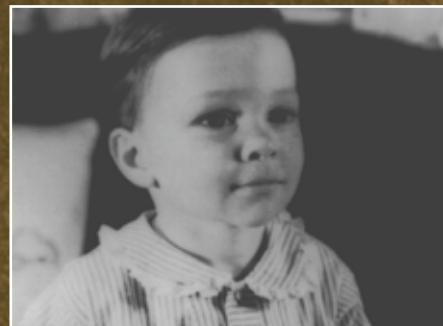


Thomas Centilla

March 29, 1942 - February 18, 2013





Thomas's Life Story

Thomas Gerald Centilla was born March 29, 1942 in Grand Rapids, Michigan at a time when the United States was cautiously watching events unfold in Europe, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt was encouraging Americans with his Fireside Chats. Families had come through the challenges of economic depression with a strong work ethic and a determination to make life better for their children.

Thomas was the oldest of Gerald and Roberta (Esch) Centilla's six children, growing up across the street from John Ball Park Zoo. What a perfect place for the kids to explore! They visited the park daily and apparently developed such familiarity that they seemed to attract animals. One day a duck followed them home and ended up becoming the family pet. They built a "dog" house for Donald duck, and each morning their mom gathered duck eggs for breakfast.

That animal magnetism proved itself one other time when a Red Squirrel climbed up Thomas' leg, and any attempt to put it down or shoo it away was fruitless. The squirrel only came back and did the same thing, so Thomas put it in his pocket and took him home. Charlie, the pet squirrel, went nearly everywhere with Thomas—even into stores—tucked securely in his pocket. The look on people's faces when they saw Charlie peeking out was priceless! For a more usual pet, Thomas had white toy poodle named Buddy, whom he loved with all his heart.

Thomas attended St. Mary's Catholic School and graduated from Grand Rapids Catholic High School, where he lettered in Cross Country. He went on to study business administration at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Michigan and stayed in the city to work at Checker Motors. As supervisor of the engineering department, he contributed to the company until it went out of business after 87 years in taxi cab manufacturing.

Thomas then went to work for the City of Portage, where he spent the remainder of his career, including 14 ½ years as Chief Union Steward.

He was a City Councilman from 1973-1979 and also the Portage Parks Board Chairman for the City of Portage. In his role with city parks, he served on the development board for Lakeview Park as well as Ramona Park and was pleased to witness their openings. His membership in a number of local and regional boards showed how much Thomas was invested in his community. He was on the board of directors of the Portage Jaycees, a lieutenant for the Kalamazoo County Sheriff's Reserves, and a member of the Usher's Club at St. Catherine's Catholic Church for over 20 years. For his many contributions, Thomas received over 26 awards for outstanding community service.



Brimming with energy and abilities in his professional and civic life, Thomas overflowed with musical talent. He played guitar, accordion and French horn, but he was a genius at the piano. He could sit down, start playing by ear and singing for hours at a time, sometimes long into the night and to the delight of his family. At one time, he led a band called Tommy C and the Nightliners. They played in night clubs and at weddings and other functions, and the band even made a 45rpm record. Tommy was especially passionate about the music of Elvis Presley, and listeners often said how much his beautiful deep voice sounded like Elvis.

Taking music "on the road," Thomas liked to blast songs from his car cassette player. With the window down and cigarette smoke billowing, he blared out the music of Elvis, Oakridge Boys, Alabama, Frankie Vali and the Four Seasons or anything else from the 50s and 60s. When he recently went to a Frankie Vali concert, Thomas enjoyed every minute of it as if he was back in his car, pumping out his music.

As far as cars go, Thomas always took pride in his vehicles and cared for everything he owned. In particular, he gave lots of time and attention to his swimming pool. He spent hours cleaning the pool to such a degree that it sparkled in the sunlight. Visitors to the house often wondered how a pool could shine like a diamond.

That meticulous attentiveness to detail sometimes incriminated people (in a lighthearted way). His home office was set up with a place for everything and everything in its place. His pencil and his ink pen always set in a specific spot, and because Thomas had a photographic memory, he knew if anything was out of place. It never failed that if anyone went into his office or even touched his pencil, he somehow knew and would bellow, "Who's been in my office?" His kids speculated that he had had a hidden camera installed.

There are many stories the family tells of how much Thomas loved spending time with them. Anything they did together was his favorite thing to do. Whether going out to dinner or on trips, heading for the lake or camping at Sandy Pines, Thomas was an eager participant. Las Vegas was a preferred destination, because Thomas could play slots and take in the shows and the nightlife. He always managed to find a way to get in with the celebrities and score front row seats. He had that kind of boldness and charisma.

Among other funny stories are those told by his daughters. When one of them was getting married in the Bahamas, Thomas was not only excited to give her away, but he also had a surprise. He talked about an outfit he had picked out that he wasn't going to reveal until the day of the wedding. When the day arrived, Thomas appeared all in white-white shirt, white tie, white pants, white socks, white shoes-and the biggest smile on his face ever! Needless to say, the bride was shocked, but Thomas thought it was hilarious and stood next to her during the entire service; the joke being: Who is the groom going to know to marry since both are in white?!



Another funny memory comes out of a family trip to California. Thomas decided to find as many movie stars as he could, so he bought a map to the stars' homes and rented a Mustang convertible-to fit in, of course. It worked. The family got to meet Michael Landon because Thomas snuck them into the Roosevelt Hotel while they were filming Highway to Heaven. Then he drove to Bob Hope's home and, surprised to find the gate open, he kept going up the long driveway, ignoring the intercoms that were stating very loudly, "This is private property, please turn around and leave the premises." Thomas got as far as the front door when armed guards came rushing out to ask what he was doing there. To which Thomas replied, "Well, the gates were open, so we thought it was okay. We just wanted to meet Bob Hope and get an autograph!"



Thomas was thrilled to be the father of his three daughters, and when they grew to have families of their own, nothing made him happier than to be with his grandchildren. Attending their ballgames, plays, recitals, grandparents' day at school-no matter what it was-Thomas made sure he was there for them. He was such a proud PAPA. In fact, one of the saddest aspects of the illness that would claim his life was that he wouldn't see what his grandchildren would become. He spoke of how terribly much he would miss his grandkids, whom he loved "like there was no tomorrow."

It was obvious how much Thomas cared for his family and had the best interests of his grandchildren in mind at all times. If he was ever feeling down and one of the grandkids walked in, he perked up immediately. The sparkle in his eyes when they were around, lit up the room with such love and admiration that it amazed everyone who saw it. Despite his illness, he still teased people, especially his granddaughters who couldn't help but crack up at his humor. He would grin in a way that he knew he was being a stinker, but that was his way of trying to get others to smile...even when he was not feeling well.



Thomas was a fighter who showed his dignity and pride right through his illness. As he always said: "I will do it my way, AND THAT HE DID!!" up to the very end!!

Thomas Gerald Centilla loved and was loved by his children, Kim Andersen, Terri Centilla-Pieratt (Tim Pieratt), Jodi Centilla-Trimble (Rich Trimble) and grandchildren, Brandon Centilla, Austin Andersen, and Sami and Sky Trimble.



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