

EULOGY FOR ANTHONY J. "TONY" NATA III

Delivered by Jeff Parness

Saturday, June 23, 2007

Slidell, Louisiana

So why is a guy with a funny accent from New York standing in front of you to give a Eulogy for a precious little boy from Louisiana?

Because I *loved* Tony – and I *continue to love* Tony – and I *will always love* Tony, like my own son.

Two weeks after Hurricane Katrina, I was sitting in my Manhattan apartment watching CNN. And on came a story about an amazing family in Slidell facing an unimaginable situation.

The storm had almost destroyed their home and mold was already forming in the structure. But this young family had an even greater challenge. Their 6-year-old son had Leukemia and they were awaiting a bone-marrow transplant from the boy's 4-year-old sister.

When the CNN reporter asked the young mother how she could handle it all, how she could fight for her home *and* her son's life at the same time, this extraordinary Mom responded, "you *got* to. It's about your *kids*." She then added the familiar phrase that "God doesn't give you more than you can handle."

Her words sent chills down my spine. This was more than *anybody* should have to handle.

And then it was the Dad's turn. When asked how he dealt with the challenge to his young son's life and the challenge of rebuilding, he responded in a determined Louisiana accent, "*Ya gotta get stronger in a situation like this. It's the only way we gonna survive.*"

Bubba, Robin – same holds true today. We *gotta get stronger* to handle this loss. It's the only way we're gonna get through this. And we *are* gonna get through this. All of us. Together.

As some of you may know, I was one of over 150 volunteers from around this amazing country who had the true honor and privilege of helping to rebuild Tony's house. It started with a fishing deck. Then the house. Then the addition on to the house that became Tony's refuge after his bone marrow transplant.

But as I told Bubba and Robin long ago, Foundations from New York and Mississippi didn't rebuild their house. Two things rebuilt their House. *Tony built that house.* And the *love and devotion* that Robin and Bubba showed Tony and Ali all throughout their ordeal, built that house.

Tony's incredible courage in battling an unimaginable disease -- powered each one of those volunteers to work as hard as they could as they swung hammers, hung sheetrock, painted walls.

And the unconditional and absolutely *limitless LOVE* which Robin and Bubba showed their children inspired each one of us to do what we could to get them back together under the same roof as quickly as possible.

Tony built that house. And *Robin and Bubba's love as parents* built that house. We were all just along for the ride.

And now we come to today. There is something so unfathomable and inherently tragic in the loss of a child. And I think a lot of it has to do with *numbers* and the young age at which a child passes.

But that doesn't give Tony the credit he deserves.

Tony did more in his 8 years than most of us will ever do in a lifetime.

Look around you. Look on the CaringBridge website. Tony brought together and inspired a community of *hundreds*, perhaps *thousands* of people all around this country and the world. Tony was responsible for creating hundreds of relationships between people who otherwise might never have met. And those relationships Tony helped build are glued together with LOVE that will not end today with Tony's funeral. That love will last with each one of us for our lifetimes. Tony was – and remains – a builder.

Tony inspired us all with his *bravery*. With his *determination* to still be a kid in the face of the greatest odds. Tony caused so many people to get off their couches and take action, to help neighbors cross-town and cross-country in an incredible time of need.

Tony changed so many peoples lives forever. And we are all better for it.

Personally, Tony gave me a focus and determination and clarity of purpose in my own life that I had never experienced in 40 years and that I will take with me until my dying day.

Tony taught us all about the fragility of life and how precious – the special little moments really are.

They say that we never really *own* our children. We just get to *borrow* them from God for a certain amount of time.

Well Tony's gone home. But it does not end for Tony *here*, today.

Tony has continued to inspire us in his passing and will continue to inspire us in his memory for all our days.

How many people in this room have hugged their kids that much extra these past few months? How many people in this room have held their spouses hands that much tighter through all this? How many people have stopped sweating the small stuff to reflect on and realize just how important the love we share with our family and friends really is?

Tony continues to inspire us all.

As for me, I have a terrible addiction to e-mail. And what makes it worse is that I work out of my home. So in the evenings when Evan & Josh return home, I sometimes fail to get into *their* world – to really make a conscious break from my work to get into what is really important to *them*.

But not any more. Two nights ago as I was communicating via e-mail, Josh came into my home office and asked for my help figuring out a challenge

with his Legos. Habit took over and I told him I'd be there when I finish. But then I caught myself. And I realized that the e-mail could wait. It would still be there when I would get back. What I needed to do was to *get down on my hands and knees in the playroom and help Josh* figure out how to piece together his Legos. That was what was really important.

That was Tony – still working his magic – still inspiring us.

One of my favorite pictures I have of Tony is a candid shot of Bubba and Tony at the celebration party we had last March 12, 2006 on the deck. Amidst all the people and music and food and wonderful chaos that day, Bubba got down on his knees besides Tony, helping him to string up a new fishing line. It was as if they were the only two people in the world – a boy and his father about to throw a line in the water.

What a lesson for us all. How precious life is. How important it is to stop what we are doing and get down on our knees to be with our children at *their level, in their world.*

Robin and Bubba -- you have set the bar high for of all us to be the *best parents* we can be. Your devotion to your children and Tony's devotion to LIFE, still inspires us and will ALWAYS inspire us.

It is no surprise how hard Tony fought against Leukemia. Look at the stock he comes from.

One of the most special moments of my entire life occurred on Saturday December 10, 2005 as we were finishing the rebuilding of the deck. Amidst all the people and TV crews and family, I walked the perimeter of the deck and one of the volunteers building the deck yelled out "Hey Jeff. We're up to the last plank!" Cool, I thought, and I continued to walk on. And then I stopped in my tracks and yelled at him to stop. *WAIT – Tony needs to be the one to hammer the last nail.*

I quietly walked up to Bubba and asked him if he thought Tony would like to hammer in the last nail. Bubba walked over to Tony and asked him. And just as quietly, Bubba and Tony and I walked over to the final plank, guided by Tony's silent determination.

And then without any fanfare and without any announcement, Tony picked up a pretty heavy hammer and started pounding at that nail. And he wouldn't stop. But every 20 seconds or so, the energy would drain from Tony. He would collapse just a bit, his shoulders would slump, and then he would take a deep breath, regain his composure, and start to hammer again.

I was kneeling besides Tony on one side and Bubba was kneeling beside him on the other. The only thing *my* eyes focused on were Tony and that hammer hitting that nail. But then I realized something magical was happening. People had stopped working. They stopped talking. The compressors got turned off. And suddenly a circle of close to 40 or 50 people gathered around in total silence -- crying profusely -- but *marveling* at the determination of this *amazing* little boy.

It took Tony almost 3 minutes to hammer in that nail. And towards the end, when it seemed like Tony had no energy left at all to pick up that hammer, Bubba whispered to Tony. "Here Son. Let me help with you that." And remember what he said Bubba?

He said, "Dad. I'm going to do it myself."

That was Tony. And that IS Tony. And that will ALWAYS be Tony.

An incredible kid. Incredible determination. And an inspiration that is eternal.

Tony's life was *not about* Leukemia or his illness or about tragedy. Tony's life was about Tony's LOVE of life and his family's PASSION for life.

These are incredibly difficult days for all of all us who love this little boy and his family. But *we owe it to Tony* not to focus on the way he died -- but the way he lived.

For me, I choose to remember Tony as the kid who never really talked to me that much on all my visits to help rebuild his home but *boy did he crack up* when I caught that one and only fish off his dock which immediately POOPED all over me when I reeled it in!

Fish Poop made Tony laugh. And so did Alligator parts!

I choose to remember Tony as the kid who lassoed the Alligator tail with his cousin Jesse and dragged it all over the deck, much to the dismay and consternation of Ali.

I choose to remember Tony as the kid who put a beer in the mouth of an Alligator head.

I choose to remember Tony as the kid who forced me out of *my hammock* on *his* deck. As the kid who chased his sister and cousins around the deck in miniature monster trucks. As the kid who instructed his cousin Caleb which Legos to build on his behalf. And as the precious little boy who felt more comfortable jumping in the portable crib to lay down alongside his beloved Maykayla than to hang out with all us adults.

I choose to remember Tony as the kid who loved making his toy sharks bite off the arms of the divers in toy cages. While videotaping one episode of this with him, I posed the question to Tony, “Tony, you know you have a bizarre sense of humor kid?” To which he replied with a coy smile, “*Yeah, I know.*” Tony knew who he was. And quite frankly, that half- hour I spent with him making videos of bloodied shark divers was the best one-on-one time I had ever experienced with him. Because I was in *Tony’s world*.

And even in his final days, Tony continued to give me and my family special gifts. My sons and wife Sandy and I had one of the greatest experiences ever being tourists in our own city -- New York -- when we decided to drag *life-size cardboard cut-outs of Tony and Ali* all around New York City for an entire weekend -- snapping photos of “Flat Tony and Flat Ali” on their Big Adventure in the Big Apple.

And I will forever cherish the moments with Tony just 2 weeks ago, when I sat with him and showed him the pictures of where we ** TOOK ** him and his sister in our city. Central Park. The Statue of Liberty. The Natural History Museum. Tony was smiling. I was smiling. And *that's* what I choose to remember about Tony. About how he *lived*, not how he died.

Of course Tony's passing leaves gigantic holes in all of our hearts. But I have to ask you -- how would Tony want us to fill those holes?

By loving our kids that much more? By becoming the best friends we can be to our spouses and partners? Or he might just say "Uncle Jeff, just shut up already and tell 'em to go fishing."

Next time you go fishing, fish with Tony. Feel his spirit and his presence. He will be there with us. Always.

To the whole Nata family Robin and Bubba and Ali, to Mam Maw and Paw Paw, Grandpa Tony and Edith, Aunt Allison and Uncle Sean, Antoinette, Ashley, Freddy, Leslie, Ralph, and all his wonderful cousins -- Jesse, Hunter, Emma, Caleb, Chelsea, Chastity, Christin, and Makayla and Cole -- I know it will always feel like someone is missing every time you have a crawfish boil, or grill a redfish out on that beautiful deck.

But take a minute to breathe in that amazing air. And stare into the swampgrass. And look deep into those beautiful sunsets -- and you'll see Tony. He is there. And Tony will always be there with you.

A life is not merely about a physical presence. It is about that special God-given spirit that resides deep inside that person's soul. And Tony's spirit will be with us -- inside of us -- forever.

We all know Tony is in a better place. Fishing with his uncle Jesse. Being watched over by Bonita and Hagay and CJ Martin and other special angels that left this earth too soon.

But we *also* know he will always be with us *in our hearts*. And that we will *all* have the pleasure of meeting up with him again sometime soon.

But between now and then, Tony would want us to go on – to go fishing. And enjoy each and every day, and all the simple moments.

Fishing with Jimmy Houston was fun. And fishing with his parents and family were moments that were so very precious.

But like my sons Evan & Josh suggested to me the other night, right now *Tony's fishing with God*.

And we thank God for blessing us with Tony and for letting us borrow him for these sacred 8 years.

To all the nurses and doctors and staff at Clinic and Children's Hospital and all the other places Tony received care and where his parents received comfort, I thank you on behalf of everyone who loves this family.

Robin and Bubba and Ali – you are all our heroes. Ali, you delivered something straight from God through your precious little body that gave Tony a gift none of us could have ever given him – TIME.

And Robin and Bubba you're our heroes because you set an example of sacrifice, and faith, courage, and devotion to your children that each one of us can only hope to aspire to.

I know it is customary at a funeral to say "Sorry for your Loss. But Robin and Bubba – let me be the first to tell you *I am Happy for your Gain!* As a matter of fact, I am *thrilled* for your gain that you had 8 precious years to *give Tony -- and receive from Tony -- so much joy and so much love*.

None of that will end today.

Last Friday I had a conversation with Robin and asked her sarcastically if she had an idea how loved they are? I then emphasized that all that love *did not* come from the fact that people *felt sorry for them* -- but that people are *inspired* by Tony's courage and Robin and Bubba's devotion to their kids.

When a ballplayer makes an amazing catch, it is customary that all the fans stand and applaud to acknowledge a job well done. When a singer finishes a well loved tune, people stand and applaud to acknowledge a job well done. What Robin and Bubba and Tony and Ali did here -- was *so much more important*.

I know it is not customary -- but would those of you who feel up to it -- please *rise and join me in showing our love* for the *amazing fight this little boy waged, and for the amazing life he lived* by giving Tony and Ali and Robin and Bubba a huge round of Applause.

Robin and Bubba -- allowing me to give this Eulogy is probably the greatest honor anyone has ever extended to me.

But having given me the chance to be Tony's "Uncle Jeff from New Yawk" is -- and *will always be* -- an even greater honor that I will take with me forever.

And on that final note, I have to ask everyone here a favor. There is simply *no way* that a carpetbagger like me can come down here to Louisiana all the way from New York and have the *last word*.

I know there are so many people in this room who have precious memories of *things Tony did to make you smile*, and things *you did to make Tony smile*.

Would you please honor us -- and especially Tony -- with some of those stories?

God bless you all.