

Article from Patch

"Good night, sweet prince; and flights of angels see thee to thy rest." William Shakespeare

When the news of Richey Suncoast Theater operator Charlie Skelton's death was announced late last month, it hit our family hard

We are not alone in our sadness, of course, in the close community that is West Pasco in general and New Port Richey in particular. Charlie touched so many lives with his infectious smile, his genuine and hearty laugh and his always positive and upbeat mood. Two of my three children had the opportunity to appear on the Richey Suncoast Theater stage in plays that Charlie produced every Christmas season to celebrate both the holiday and Pasco County's history.

When Charlie and his wife Marie first took the reins of the down-on-its-luck Richey Suncoast Theater, they had a daunting task ahead of them. Gathering a fine group of local leaders around them they transformed the rundown one-time movie house into the thriving community theater venue it is today. While Marie took care of the on-stage business, Charlie became the public face of Richey Suncoast. He was a tireless advocate for the arts, especially his efforts to restore New Port Richey's status as the entertainment center it once was during the city's 1920's heyday.

I first met Charlie in the 90s, when he came to our legislative office to toss around his plans about turning the theater around. We both hail from Philadelphia so that common background, and our mutual love for drama, gave us an instant connection. He shared a love for politics, having worked for Philly Mayor Frank Rizzo, a revered leader in Southeast Pennsylvania. We shared many a conversation about the inner workings of that great city.

A letter or two of support for a cultural affairs/ historical preservation grant came out of our office as Senator Fasano agreed with Charlie's vision for the theater. Over the years, we would cross paths many times, some of it professionally, some of it theatrically, but always with a friendliness that made me feel instantly comfortable.

Charlie was one of those people who you may not see for a long stretch of time, but when you reconnect, it is as if no time had passed at all. I recall the day I stopped by the theater to pick up tickets

for a show. He was as excited as a boy on Christmas morning as he showed me the new ticket machine that had been recently installed in the box office.

When the theater renovations were complete, he gleefully pointed out all the improvements that had restored it to its former glory. He was as proud as a parent whose child had just won a beauty contest or an Olympic medal. His enthusiasm was contagious and you always left him feeling better about the world.

Since the start of the new millennium, my daughters Rebekah and Elizabeth have spent time on the Richey Suncoast stage. Over the past two decades I spent 16 of those years heading up two local church drama groups. Until I saw Richey Suncoast in action I thought I was doing well as a director. Once I realized how far I had to go I set a personal goal to elevate the productions to the level of stagecraft found at Richey Suncoast. That goal has not yet been met but I will redouble my efforts if for no other reason than to honor Charlie's memory.

Perhaps the greatest honor that Charlie bestowed upon me came in 2010 when he attended the Christmas production at CrossPoint Church. Charlie's presence at the second performance of my play Ben and Angel was akin to having F. Murray Abraham or Boyd Gaines in the audience. Afterward, I asked for Charlie's advice on everything from the script to his recommendations about how we could improve the stage, lighting and sound system.

Charlie was as gracious as always and, I believe, appreciated the opportunity to share some of his knowledge with me. Of all our conversations over the years I will remember that one the most. He was the wise and seasoned stage veteran imparting some of his experience to a fellow dramatist. I soaked up his words like a sponge.

The community will have the opportunity to come together on August 12 at the Suncoast to remember Charlie. I know that my own memories must pale in comparison to those who worked with Charlie much more closely than I ever did. However, for me, Charlie will be the epitome of what a community theatre operator should be. Marie, his wife, has been quoted in the newspaper saying she will carry on Charlie's work. I have no doubt she will. Her own passion for the theater equals Charlie's. His legacy is in very good hands.

I welcome your questions about the legislative process, state government or any related matters. Please feel free to leave your questions in the comment section and I will answer them in an upcoming post. If there is a specific topic you would like me to write about please let me know as well. I look forward to responding to your comments!