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MEMORIAL FOR PHIL BUCHEN

August 17, 2002

More frequently now than previously, I believe, we celebrate lives at memorial services rather than mourn at funerals. No admonitions thunder from pulpits. We gather to recall and share our recollections, to respect and appreciate our friends whose friendship is no longer available to us except through memory. The memorial service is one of recognition for the gift of life bestowed upon friends now gone and closure for us as we get about living until our time comes. For these purposes we gather to talk about Bunny and Phil Buchen. All of us here are grateful to George Loomis who believed it was appropriate, even necessary, to remember his sister and brother-in-law in this church and this community where events important to their development and their contribution took place, and where so many of their dearest friends reside.

We each bring our memories of Bunny and Phil to this sanctuary. All of us shared in their friendly social ways, their positive optimistic outlook, but each of us had our own experiences with them. On a sunny winter afternoon in 1969 I entered the office of Law, Weathers and Buchen. I had been told, probably by Bill Seidman, that Phil was Grand Valley’s Counsel and the college had a problem with the Ottawa County Sheriff closing the
student newspaper. I was immediately won over to him by his smile, his handshake, and what I call his refined Sheboygan County accent. No one had told me that he set aside his law career for five years to be Grand Valley’s first employee and Vice President, nor did he mention it in our first discussion. When I discovered that he was there at the beginning, and what he had done, I began to understand how extraordinary was his commitment. First, there are few people who will interrupt a successful career in mid-life, at substantial financial sacrifice, to launch a new endeavor that has no prospect of personal monetary reward. Second, there was no guarantee that all his skill and effort could make the new college successful. He took a risk that most people at his stage of life would not take.

That risk led to one of his two contributions I have observed that profoundly changed the civic landscape. Few people have the opportunity or fortitude to do what Phil did. While Bill Seidman and a citizens committee initiated the political action to establish a public senior higher education institution in this part of west Michigan, Phil was called upon to make a plan, formulate policies, and establish practices for operation of a college. He then accepted the job of implementing those policies and practices, and building a campus. This region will never be the same. It will always be better, as will higher education in Michigan because Grand Valley State
University exists. As we see it now, it is difficult to imagine its beginnings, just as it is hard to imagine an adult as once an infant. But we have come to know that the experiences of one’s infancy are formative in a person’s life, and so it is with universities. Those who are there when the institution is planned and opened influence what it is to become. As the years pass, the founders, and their effect, and their importance fade in the reality and dynamics of the present. At this time for remembering the Buchens, I wanted Phil, and Bunny too, credited as agents of a major change in her hometown and his adopted one. They will always be found when the foundation of the University is examined. There will be always a story to tell about the man whose portrait hangs in Grand Valley’s Hall of Fame.

When Bunny and Phil went to Washington as Jerry Ford by a unique historical event took the Vice Presidency of the nation, their relationships with friends in Grand Rapids altered little if at all. As I reflected on this, two reasons for it came to mind. First, their lives were in part sustained by the warmth of friendship. Once entered into, friendship was too much enjoyed, too much cherished to let it slip away. Second, their loyalty to one another was transparent. You saw it within minutes of being with them. It was a hallmark of their relationship, and in that loyalty with its love, commonality of mind and respect, we find the ingredient of friendship. It was natural for
them, so loyal to one another, to carry that characteristic beyond themselves into the making and keeping of many and substantial friendships.

I was fortunate to be in Washington often during their early years in the capital. Bunny in her special way made a point to include me and Nancy, on the occasions she accompanied me, in social events when she entertained newly established Washington friends. She was skilled in the art of creating friend-making networks. Many of us remember when she was 80 years old, and we received an invitation to a party at Kent Country Club. When she addressed her guests she said the time had come in her life for a final party for friends in Grand Rapids. She explained how important her friends were to her and how much she appreciated their love. She would not let time rob her of a public opportunity to acknowledge what was so important to her—friendships.

Charged by his friend and colleague Jerry Ford to be his personal counsel as President of the United States, Phil made the second landscape change that I alluded to earlier. This time the nation would not be the same because of it. He recommended that the President pardon Richard Nixon, and carried a lot of the legal load to make that happen. The decision, immediately controversial, historically proven correct, was noteworthy in Phil’s career and a defining moment in Ford’s presidency. Phil had the
character and toughness to take the heat. Recently when Jerry Ford was
given the Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award for his pardon of Richard
Nixon, the first person I thought of was Phil Buchen. I wanted to say, Phil
too.

In this time of reflection about Bunny and Phil their open, extending
even zestful spirit towards friends, dominates my feelings and memory of
them. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, “A friend may well be reckoned the
masterpiece of nature.” He must have had an experience similar to our
experiences with Bunny and Phil.