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Remarks, delivered at the Memorial Service for Paul Johnson on December 23, 2003

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Paul Johnson
Memorial Service
December 23, 2003

Paul Johnson was an American icon. Had I said that to him directly, a substantial chuckle and a slightly self-depreciating gesture would be the response. But think about it. He was a successful businessman, community leader, churchman and solidly loyal to his family and friends. America was built by people like him throughout the towns and regions of the nation. In his prime there wasn't a civic, church, or school project in the community that didn't bear his mark or claim some of his treasure. He was Mr. Main Street. In times past you found portraits of people like him in public buildings and sometimes statues on the town green. If a movie of his life

had been made there was only one actor for the part, Jimmy Stewart, the old icon symbol himself.

Paul and I came together in the interest of then Grand Valley State College. He called us the Avis Twins. Avis was second to Hertz in the rental car business, and their slogan was “We try harder.” In those early days all of the potential contributors to the college had other college loyalties. Paul’s point was, “make us your number two and help the region by giving to Grand Valley”. We surely tried hard, and had some success. Paul Johnson is among the ten most important builders of the fine University that stands proudly in our region.

Paul had a commitment that came from deep within to make the places where he resided better. He entered the fray with his ideas, time and money. He was never on the sideline. That was his destiny.

When we as children ventured beyond the immediate family we discovered friendship and how important it was to our happiness. Remember the best friend? Usually a person had a series of best friends throughout childhood and adolescence. Adult interests change the nature of friendship but not the need for it. For 30 years Paul and I had what I call a “best friend” relationship. Best in this instance is not exclusive but defining. There are several here who had a “best friend” relationship with him. Paul did not talk readily about emotional relationships like some of us can, but friendship was one of his specialties in the way he lived. Loyalty – none greater, working closely together and enjoying it – none better at it, generosity in spirit towards friends – none had more, shared humor and fun – readily available. For me Friendship, that was his defining characteristic.

Charlotte told me with humor in her voice that Paul filed personal papers relating to her ~~and their daughters~~ ^{Arvi and Jon} under unpaid bills. That was typical Paul Johnson humor. Of course there is no one who would more promptly pay his bills both financial and otherwise. From finances to friends to family he was deliberate and orderly. There were no loose ends. Paul did not like loose ends. For many orderly people like Paul, orderliness rules their lives and becomes top priority. Paul used it to support the efficient ways he did his business and supported the causes he espoused. It worked for him. It did not rule him. That is the way he managed his life.

I have not decided whether this is a good day or a bad day. Befitting Paulian life he gave us ample time to prepare for his death. When he left, no one, family or friends could wish that he would stay longer as he was. This, his 84th birthday, is a celebration of his life, and he always had parties on his birthday

~~day~~. So this is a good day to remember our enjoyment of his friendship and be sociable together. Yet, when I examine my heart, I miss him deeply. That does not make for such a good day.