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Remarks for Stuart Padnos Memorial, delivered on April 5, 2012

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We all lost a friend on Tuesday, but we did not lose a friendship. That’s the way I feel about it. For many of us Stuart has been a friend for the greater part of our lives; for his sons, all of theirs. Stuart had the qualities that allowed friendship to be more than superficial. First, he could get out of himself and be genuinely interested in another, not a surface interest, a real interest.

Secondly, he had interests himself that attached themselves to and included others. He liked to make art, he liked to play tennis, and he enjoyed following as well as playing sports. He skied. It’s an individual sport, but the sociability that accompanies it suited Stuart. His social nature led to situations that provided him fun, opportunities for exchange of ideas, a place to articulate and grow his own life view.

Third, Stuart was loyal. You had to pass muster, but once you did you could trust his loyalty. That quality permeated family relationships. Both he and Seymour possessed it. It was a necessary ingredient as they inherited the business from their father.

Fourth, Stuart was generous. He was discerning, but he really wanted to see the good side of people and situations. He and Barbara wanted to make things better and more beautiful and sensibly went about doing it. We see evidence of this throughout our West Michigan institutions, but we can see it in the business, too. You cannot have a business populated by so many members of the extended family without disagreements. The resulting tensions can bring destruction unless underlying the enterprise is a generous spirit. Both Stuart and Seymour have that in their DNA and it shows in the 3rd generation. Generous friends of mine have come to realize that I might offer them an opportunity to express their generosity. After Seymour and
Esther contributed to engineering and science at Grand Valley, I was having lunch with Stuart as we did periodically. Immediately upon being seated he said to me, “I have been watching you with Seymour and Esther. I know what you are doing. Now I supposed you are going to begin with me.” I asked, “Do you think I should?” With a smile he said, “I suppose so.”

Fifth, Stuart had a sense of humor. I am sure when times were tough at Padnos Iron and Metal Stuart could provide a humor injection. I was never with him without such an injection and it often had an edge of clarifying his view of a matter and adding interest to the discussion.

On this occasion we recall the qualities and characteristics that defined Stuart, but it is appropriate also to assess the impact Stuart, comprised of those qualities, made on the broader society. We have not only lost a friend, and father, grandfather, and uncle, but a major citizen, and philanthropist. What is his legacy?

First, he along with his brother developed, a world class business, one that is emulated in the industry, recognized throughout the world as one of the best, and in West Michigan is a significant part of our economic engine.

Second, as a Jew he was devout but not judgmental about those who are not Jewish. As a child in Holland I suppose he learned inclusiveness early since he did not have the option of many Jewish playmates. Throughout his life he practiced his religion with dignity, allowing those outside his faith to respect him and what he believed. This is more significant than it might seem, since he matured in a society that contains a sizeable population that claims a rather narrow vision on truth. His inner life was a light revealing to all how to live with one another. He may not have realized how important that was.

Third, he was a carpenter of good works. There is hardly an edifice for good, in Holland, and throughout West Michigan, that does not have in its structure some of his or his company’s
resources and often active participation. When we view with satisfaction what has been achieved in West Michigan in the last 75 years, Stuart’s portrait must hang amongst those who made it happen.

One day I saw Stuart’s marching band, designed by him and assembled using parts of scrap metal. At our next lunch together I told him how much I admired it. I told him the only problem was the color of the band uniforms. He chuckled. He was not averse to bating me with stories of his alma mater. I asked him to do one with Grand Valley colors for our Allendale campus. I warned him that if he did, orders for marching bands would be forthcoming. He did and they did. The GVSU Allendale campus will always be distinguished by this unique, arresting, and even slightly humorous sculpture. Could it be that a century from now Stuart’s memory will be best perpetuated through the art he created? Could be. That leaves me with a smile.