

A Tribute to Francis Thomas "Mugs" McNamara

By Joe McNamara

Early Saturday morning, November 7, 2020, Francis Thomas McNamara took his final breath, in his own bed, surrounded by his family. Advanced Congestive Heart Failure may have won the battle, but he went out on his own terms, lucidly and methodically leaving instructions for his memorial service, lovingly sharing private farewells to each family member, listening to his classical music playlist of Debussy and Chopin, closing his eyes and then raising his right hand as if he was conducting his final concert.



Born on December 20, 1933, he was the youngest of the five children born to John and Josephine "Josie" McNamara and was the first to be delivered in a hospital. His mother was so smitten with her youngest that she called him her little "Mugings", and old Irish term of endearment that was lost on his sentimentally challenged older brothers who shortened it to the more masculine version of Mugs — and the name stuck.



Young Mugs and his pal

His two older brothers, Jim and John, developed towering personalities on the ball fields and in the neighborhood, and he adored and idolized them. His sisters, Mary and Anne, spoiled him and showered him with sweetness.

Although his father could be distant at times, his mother, on a fast track to sainthood, cared for their neighborhood at 24th and F Street as if every kid were her own. She held court at the ball field at Grant Park, baking cookies, making sandwiches, keeping score, and relished being the final arbitrator to settle a close play at the plate. A proud graduate from the Sacramento High School class of 1915, Josie instilled a curiosity

for knowledge that inspired young Mugs, and some days she allowed him to stay home from school to accompany her on her errands. After a busy day of visiting nuns, they closed the day out with a malt at the soda shop, often keeping their special day a secret from the other children. Josie's love and knowledge of Sacramento was infectious, and Mugs loved the stories of her working on the beautiful steamer ships that chugged up and down the mighty Sacramento River.

She was also a prophet who spoke of tolerance, dignity, and the eradication of anything resem-

bling prejudice during the days when racism was a tape worm on the American system. Her oldest son Jim dubbed her "Swan" for her beauty and grace, and every ounce of compassion and empathy that she possessed was bequeathed to her five children.

Shy and laconic, agreeable and accommodating, young Mugs often stayed in the shadows, content with a book, a walk with a friend, or an afternoon in the company of the family dog. But in the summer of 1946, his father died at the young age

of 51, and at the beckoning of his three uncles, young Mugs was told to stand outside the church and shake the hand of every mourner as they filed out of St. Francis Church. His father, an Irish immigrant from County Mayo, was a decorated veteran of World War I, and legions of his fellow soldiers turned out to say goodbye. That beautiful church that still stands in

the shadow of Sutter's Fort overflowed that day with the glorious fabric of Sacramento's diversity, and each hand that he shook was different: many hearty and strong, some callused by hard work, some deformed by battle, some dark as night, and others brittle and limp from decades of depression and war. That funeral was a seminal moment for young Mugs, who was now cognizant of his family's roots in Sacramento and the sacrifices they made for his future. He was ready to emerge from the wings.

Like his uncles before, Mugs attended Christian Brothers High School graduating in 1951. Like his brothers before, he played baseball and would be the first to tell you that he did not measure up to their star power on the diamond. His star power, still in germination, would be in leadership. Seeing how easy baseball came to his two brothers, and how hard he had to work just to keep up, made him the ideal teammate: he was patient, encouraging, and inspiring. He was the captain of the 1951 Christian Brothers team, he held the same honor for the state champion Sacramento City



Mugs, Jimmy, and John McNamara

College team in 1953, and after a few years in the army where he matured into an elite athlete, he went on to captain the Far West Conference Champion Chico State Wild Cats in 1958, earning All-Conference honors with a blistering .370 batting average. The Chico papers referred to him as "The Slender Ball Hawk" and the graceful center fielder caught everything hit in his direction. He was so fast that from the center field position that he once caught a foul ball to the appreciation of his show-footed left fielder. Professional scouts dangled contracts, but he was aware of how hard it was to reach the major leagues, and he saw the toll it took on his brothers as they



Mugs and his dog Rip in Chico

toiled in the minor leagues. He decided to stay in Chico and earn the first college degree in the McNamara family, a master's degree in education soon followed, and you can still check out his published thesis in the Chico State Library. Mugs loved driving through Chico with his big Boxer dog Rip drooling out the window. Rip was not happy when his duo became a trio, and often growled at the pretty young sorority girl who now sat in the front seat.



Sally and Mugs McNamara

Mugs McNamara married Sally Byrne in June of 1960 on one of the hottest days in the history of Chico, California. His groomsmen, mostly ballplayers, "inspired" by the sophistication of the elegant outdoor wedding reception decided to steal the remaining champagne bottles for their joyride back to Sacramento. The young couple honeymooned in Pacifica, set up house in Chico and started a family. Terry in 1961. Amy in 1963. Joe in 1965. Mugs would soon bring his family back to Sacramento and the journey began.

He was a teacher, the noblest of professions, and his audacious classroom presence inspired his students to become lifelong learners and not merely the takers of tests or the memorizers of dates. When he taught the history of World War I, his students were encouraged to dress up and learn the stories behind the sig-

natories of the Paris Peace Agreement of 1919: one adopting the mannerisms of France's Clemenceau, another the strategy of Britain's Lloyd George, and a third studying the rationale of President Wilson's fourteen points. Former students would later testify that his teaching methods seared into their blood stream, circulating knowledge, waking dormant curiosity, and inspiring them to learn more, more, more. His teaching subscribed to the theory that attitudes are caught, not taught and that students could bottle a teacher's enthusiasm and sip from it for a lifetime.

Soon he would be one of the youngest principals in Sacramento, bringing the same energy and passion that so dominated his classroom. At the same time, his protector and older brother John was in Birmingham, Alabama managing the Kansas City A's Triple A team in the old Southern League. During that sweltering summer of 1966, where racism haunted every aspect of everyday life, John stood up for his lone African American ball player and refused to let the old ways divide his young ball club. To hell with the restaurants and the hotels that refused service to this college-educated young man named Reggie Jackson, we will sleep and eat on the bus. And they did.



The young principal

Just a few years later, Mugs would be the catalyst for the Sacramento City School District to pursue the controversial experiment of bussing; a belief that kids born in poorer neighborhoods deserved the commensurate resources of those born in wealthier abodes. Behind his desk in the quiet hamlet of River Park, Mugs presided over the successful integration of Caleb Greenwood Elementary School, much to the chagrin of its howling conservative denizens. He hired African American teachers while other principals punted to future generations. He freely socialized with his staff and could only shake his head and laugh when he took an African American secretary to lunch and was denied service because the server deemed them a racially mixed couple. His advocacy for education and racial harmony often made headlines in the local papers, and his proud mother scrapbooked every story, as she did with all her children's accomplishments.

For 35 years he worked for the Sacramento City Unified School District, the lion share at Caleb Greenwood, but when the chairman of his "retirement party" mentioned there was a movement gathering to name the school after him, he quickly kiboshed the idea and moved on to another school where he would again prove to be an innovator and an agent for change. John Bidwell Ele-

mentary School sat in one of the poorest areas of Sacramento, beset by declining enrollment, and the indifferent cold shoulder of the bureaucrats infesting the district office. Mugs knew he could help, and in a rare moment of clarity, the district agreed. With Mugs at the helm, John Bidwell soon inspired and hired new teachers laden with fresh ideas to build a "Magnet Program" that would attract students from neighboring districts with a rich and challenging curriculum, weighted towards math and science. Reversing what he did in River Park, Mugs was now "busing" countless white kids to a school that the district office deemed doomed. Enrollment and morale soared fueled by Mugs' belief that every kid, no matter what color, no matter what background, deserved a quality education.

He could have done so many things, and was often approached and encouraged to run for political office, but the thought of raising money from individuals, unions, and corporations that expected him to do their bidding dulled that thought. To him, it was always about the kids, especially the ones who were dealt unfair hands. He was keenly aware of the realities of child abuse and grew numb to the explanations of "I fell down" or "my dad's elbow hit me in the eye while we put up Christmas lights." But he also knew that if a child reported it, heavier consequences loomed. In one case, where sustained abuse on three of his young students was so apparent and undeniable, Mugs left school early and paid a visit to a house guarded by three snarling, unleashed pit bulls. On the porch, eight steps up, sat a man content that his small fence buttressed by a squad of K9 protection would protect him from the consequences of his cruelty. Mugs took off his tie and put in his pocket. He then loosened his belt, removed it, and cracked it like a whip. Opening the gate, he belted: "I'm not afraid of your dogs, and I'm not afraid of you and we need to talk!" The dogs melted at the feet of an animal lover, and soon Mugs was on the



Mugs was an early advocate for special needs education and magnet schools



From youth to adulthood, his two older brothers were his idols

porch listening to a broken man chronicle generations of child abuse. His young family often worried and wondered where he was late in the evening, long after class was dismissed. Education was never a 9 to 5 job for him.

When the day came for him to say goodbye to the Sacramento City School District, he was feted by a crowd of 400 people and was bestowed every award that his hometown could deliver. But the greatest honor was that his two older brothers were in attendance and delivered beautiful speeches of tribute to their little brother.

Retirement did not last long and at the request of his good friend Bishop Francis Quinn, Mugs was back behind the principal's desk of another struggling school: St. Anne's in the Meadowview district of South Sacramento. Once again, he worked his magic and transformed a school slated for closure into a thriving workshop of innovative educational opportunities. Enrollment doubled, then tripled, and skeptical parents in Elk Grove, began driving their children to St. Anne's School where diversity was welcome and given the chance to grow and thrive. He was once again blessed with a talented teaching staff and had the rare privilege of enjoying a cup of coffee every morning with his older sister Anne, who served as the parish secretary. These were some of the happiest days of his



With his good friend Bishop Francis Quinn



Mugs and Monsignor Edward Kavanagh met in 1948 and remained lifelong friends.

professional career and as he entered his early 60's, his energy and stamina wined teachers half his age. He kept a tidy and beautiful school, often doing his own landscaping and always had a paint bucket at the ready to blot out any semblance of graffiti. He instructed his custodians to call him at any hour if graffiti appeared on the walls, especially the bath rooms, and as his wife can testify, there were countless occasions of him speeding off in the middle of the night to take back his walls, applying the final paint strokes just as the morning school bell would ring.

Once again, he was ready for retirement, and once again, the phone would ring from another voice that he could never say no to. Monsignor Kavanagh his dear friend since 1948

asked him to anchor his teaching staff at St. Patrick's School and Mugs was back in the classroom educating a new generation of Sacramento students. He devoted nearly 50 years of his life to the children of Sacramento, and not a day went by where he was not recognized in a store or a park by a former student or teacher. His memory was vast, and not only did he remember every student's name, but he also had an attendant story to tell. Former students would shake their heads in disbelief at how he could remember an innocuous episode that happened 40 years earlier.

He would have been the first to tell you that he lived a blessed life. For 60 years he was married to his sweetheart and their love only deepened as they grew old together. He inspired his three children to be curious and to follow their dreams.

He kept a house full of books and did whatever he could for them to reach their educational goals.



Sally and Mugs were married for 60 years.

He took his family on summer vacations that featured historical themes, stopping at every one of the California Missions, visiting every cemetery, and exploring the beauty of California's State Parks. On camping trips when the sun went down he would get out his trusty copy of "A Dipper Full of Stars" and point to the heavens at the stary canopy above where Queen Cassiopeia reigned and Orion hunted the two bears that comprised the Big and Little Dippers.

He was a man of faith and never missed Sunday mass. His priest friends numbered in the hundreds and many would tell you that Mug's piety made them better priests. He was a healer in so many ways and was Sacramento's finest eulogist, often having to give that sad speech at countless funerals. As a public speaker, he had

no equal and through eloquence and good humor he assuaged the grief of so many of his friends during their most painful times. Although he kept intact the original 10 Commandments, he also lived by the rarely cited 11th Commandment: Keep Thy Religion To Thy Self, and was never preachy, hypocritical, or judgmental.

He loved being "Da" to his five grand children and they confided in him secrets and stories unknown to even their parents. He was the guy you called if you were in trouble, he was a surrogate father to dozens of his children's friends, and he looked after his late sibling's kids as if they were his own. He was fortunate to have two son in laws and a daughter in law that he loved as much as his own children.

He had golden friends and never stopped making new ones from every generation. He remained true to his old neighborhood friends and the boys that played on the sandlots became middle aged men playing softball for the Golden Seniors. He played competitively well into his 80's savoring that glorious game of his youth, and the ritual of sharing a beer with his teammates after a double header on a hot Sacramento summer day. He was elected to numerous baseball hall of fames all over Northern California but awards never meant much to him until the three McNamara brothers were inducted as a family into the Christian Brothers Hall of Fame. To his dying day, he remained in awe of his two older brothers.

He was the most charming of men and his company was constantly sought, yet he remained the happiest in his backyard, near his fountain, surrounded by his gardens, with his Weber Grill puffing away, Frank Sinatra on the cd player, a cold beer in his hand, and his wife, kids and grandchildren by his side. He was fond of saying: It is indeed the simple things that make life worth living.

But he was hardly a simple man. Blessed with a towering intellect and a curiosity to always learn more, he was an avid collector of classical music, his favorite genre to play when he was alone with his books. He read at least 50 books a year on every imaginable subject. He attended lectures including a memorable evening with Stephen Hawking. He could shift easily from Beethoven to Johnny Cash, and every Sunday morning after mass, while he made pancakes for the family he blasted "Sunday Morning Coming Down."

Mugs and Sally traveled the world together visiting the bars and cafes in Paris that he was thrown out of while in the army. He walked the sacred beaches of Normandy, and the battle fields of the First World War where his father was wounded. He adored the land of his father, and his road trip through Ireland was laced with golden moments for those fortunate to be there. With a large staff, he climbed St. Patrick's holy mountain in the pouring rain looking like an Irish Moses descending Mount Sinai. He sat in the stone house where his family survived the great famine, and he saw the port that ushered his father to America. The Irish took him in as one of their own, and he was the toast of every pub, singing and laughing till closing time.

He was a star. His signature rendition of Clancy Lowered the Boom delighted packed crowds on St. Patrick's Day and his You Tube version of Clancy and McNamara's Band still gets hundreds of hits



"Lowering the Boom" on St. Patrick's Day

every day from all over the world. Indeed, he was a credit to old Ireland.

There is a beautiful Irish song written by Phil Coulter called "The Old Man." Writing lovingly about his father, Coulter sang: "I thought he'd live forever, he seemed so big and strong but the minutes fly as the years go by for a father and a son."

Last week when that time came for Mugs, he was ready. He was able to say goodbye to his five cherished grandchildren, and they to him. He was able to say goodbye to his three kids, and they to him. And he was able to have one last snuggle with his sweetheart. Never was a man more content and never was a man more at peace.

During his final night on earth, he slipped in and out of consciousness, calling for random things. He wanted to wear his baseball sweatshirt one last time and he did. He asked if we all voted? We told him we had. He then told his final joke: "I vote that we all go to sleep", and he dozed off.

He took his last breath at 7:25 AM, Saturday, November 7th, 2020, and as the spirit of this good and decent man who dedicated his life to education, honesty, ethics, art, science, history and kindness left the room and soared towards the heavens, the news broke that his antithesis would no longer be at the helm of the America that Mugs so loved. As if he took the darkness with him.

He requested only one reading for his memorial service and it was appropriately St. Paul's Second Letter to Timothy. A lasting and fitting epitaph: I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Indeed he did, Rest in peace dad.

In lieu of flowers, remembrances in his honor can be made to The McNamara Memorial Fund at Christian Brothers High School, a permanent fund to provide financial assistance to low income students.



Joe, Amy, Mugs, Sally, and Terry McNamara in
Cape Cod, July 2018