



Family and friends say goodbye to Morrison

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By *MICHAEL JAMISON of the Missoulian*

WHITEFISH - First, they filled every last patch of pavement in the parking lot at Whitefish's United Methodist Church.

Then, they spilled down both berms of Glenwood Road, bumper to bumper to bumper. Finally, they rounded the corner and lined Wisconsin Avenue for more than a mile, the classy sedans and shiny Humvees and battered old pickups, not a few of which still had skis strapped to the roof.

A somber crowd had gathered here, some 400 strong, to say goodbye to Frank Brenner Morrison Jr., to remember and to celebrate and, of course, to mourn "a man who, in so many ways, was larger than life."

Those were the words chosen by the Rev. Deborah Schmidt, but as Monday's funeral unfolded, the man who emerged was not, in fact, some powerful symbol of Montana politics. Rather, the Frank Morrison remembered was simply a kind father, a devoted husband, a man who lived life large but was not, in the end, larger than life.

"Today, we think of Frank as a man," said John "Skeff" Sheehy, who served with Morrison on the Montana Supreme Court, in the years before Morrison's bids for governor.

The hundreds had gathered not necessarily because Morrison was a good lawyer or a respected judge, Sheehy said, but because he was a trusted friend and a fine human being.

Inside the church, away from winter's chill, a smiling Morrison greeted old friends, looking out from photographs taken on happier days. There, the judge hiking along a mountain stream, there climbing Montana's limestone cliffs. There's Morrison on a mountaintop, Morrison sailing, Morrison with his wife, his son, his daughter, always smiling, always at the center of life.

"We weren't supposed to be here for another 30 years," said son John.

Over the years, he said, Frank Morrison was his father, his idol, his teacher and coach and boss and cheerleader and partner and friend.

"He was the best dad a kid could have," John said.

And, by all accounts, the best husband a wife could hope for. If there is any part of Frank Morrison's years that could be said to be truly larger than life it is, arguably, his longtime love affair with Sharon McDonald. Both were in the sixth grade, in small-town Nebraska, when young Frank came home from school and "announced he had met his wife," John said. "After that, he never looked back."

Morrison was the husband who called home not once a day but every few hours while on the road. He was the husband who brought coffee and danish each morning, who remained madly and romantically in

love for the better part of six decades.

In his life, as in his love, Morrison was “driven by a fire within,” John said. “Dad lived his life with passion and conviction, and he helped more people than you can count.”

He began helping in the early 1960s, as a young lawyer in Nebraska. His first case was modest - a dispute over the ownership of a squirrel - and his first verdict included an order from the judge for both parties to “go home and sin no more.”

From those humble beginnings surfaced what would be considered one of Montana's great legal minds, a man remembered as a big-picture thinker and legal strategist who “loved justice,” son John said, just as he “despised oppression.”

In fact, John said, “he would have liked that we are gathered together here on Martin Luther King Day.”

The people were gathered on a snowy Monday - lawyers and judges and lawmakers, alongside farmers and ski patrollers and the young lady from the coffee shop - because in the early days of 2006 Morrison collapsed in the Seattle airport. He died Jan. 8, at age 68, due to complications from emergency surgery.

His was, the Rev. Schmidt said, “an unexpected and unwelcome death.”

“His absence,” John said, “will leave a huge hole in our lives.”

Morrison's life was a bit like the poetry he so loved - short, compressed, compacted into the essence of itself, lyrical and focused, cutting narrow and deep only to suddenly reach for unprecedented breadth.

“Where have the hours gone?” he wondered in his 1997 poem, “Reflections on my 60th birthday.”

“How much time remains?

Hurry through the day

Before the sweet refrain.”

And hurry he did, packing years into moments as he hastened to squeeze life from everywhere at once. He was remembered sitting in his robes atop the high court bench, of course, but also tumbling headlong off a horse in the Montana backcountry, and rocketing at 60 mph in a homemade coffin atop skis to win the Big Mountain's 1974 “furniture race.”

“These things were all Frank,” said friend and colleague Gene Hedman. “They were all my dear, dear friend Frank, and I'm going to miss him sorely.”

Frank Morrison was celebrated Monday as a man of uncommon intelligence, a champion of underdogs, a friend and an optimist and an eager thespian and a man for whom living life well and with purpose was the greatest adventure of all.

“He is what I will strive to become,” said law partner Sean Frampton.

Frank Morrison was not perfect, said son John, “but he was good, and often great.”

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