**A Tribute to Bill**

**A dear friend who made the ordinary extraordinary**

“Peter Pan, who and what art thou?" he cried huskily.  
" I'm joy," Peter answered at a venture, "I'm a little bird that has broken out of the egg.”  
― **J.M. Barrie,**[**Peter Pan**](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1358908)

Chris Lewis

We have heard many wonderful tributes tonight about the work of William Loren Katz the historian, activist and campaigner for civil rights.

During my long friendship with Bill he taught me many things including an American history that I certainly hadn’t discovered in school, in particular the integral roles of African Americans and Native Americans. Bill challenged my thinking, made me aware of unconscious bias and prejudice and made me determined to stand up for what I believe in, he has given me the courage to speak out against injustice.

However, my tribute is not about Bill’s long and distinguished career, this has been perfectly documented by people far more erudite than I.

Instead, I want to share a personal snapshot of the Bill I knew and a few of the wonderful memories of fun and friendship that my son and I enjoyed with a man who along with my “adopted sister” Laurie became much loved family members.

I was twenty-two years old when I first met Bill. I was working as a camp counsellor for the Fresh Air Fund. I still remember that hot August afternoon when Laurie brought him to Fishkill to visit the camp she also loved and where we both spent many wonderful summers.

Within five minutes of our meeting, Bill and I were discussing cheese, the British tendency to drink too much (not me) and of course how much we both despised Margaret Thatcher, I immediately knew I was going to like him, and this was further strengthened when he set off for free swim sporting a pair of baggy union jack swimming trunks.

Later I asked Bill if I could take a picture of him and Laurie out on the ball field, he agreed to the picture but not the location, heading instead for a rocky and not so scenic outcrop. He climbed onto the largest rock which then gave him a good few inches of height on Laurie and said, “now I’m ready”. I still cherish that first picture of a 6ft Bill.

That evening, before Laurie and Bill headed back to the city, I gave Laurie what now seems a terribly back handed compliment, whispering tactlessly that I thought he was much better than her previous boyfriends (he really was) and I hoped that we would meet up again in New York. This was to be the start of a wonderful friendship, Bill understood my past, always believed in my future and had the gift of accepting people just the way they were.

Over the years Bill taught me how to listen, telling me how much of his knowledge had been gained from listening carefully to others. I thank him for this because my life has been hugely enriched.

For many years I called Bill Peter Pan. To me he was timeless, the friend who filled our long Pennsylvania summers with joy and magic, who like Peter Pan embraced each day with infectious enthusiasm and who reinforced the simple truth that the most ordinary things can become extraordinary, simply by doing them with the right people.

When friends asked what we did each summer in Pennsylvania, I would tell them anecdotes of our trips to Wegman’s supermarket, how we listened to Jazz as we drove along country lanes. I could see the puzzled look on their faces, “hmm you go to Pennsylvania to go supermarket shopping”? What they couldn’t understand was that any trip with Bill became an adventure, whether it was trying the Caesar salad dressing in the supermarket (“you have to taste this it’s really something”, he would say) or choosing fresh ears of corn from Mrs Sealey, or heading for dinner at Craig, Linda and Megan’s or looking at Honesdale’s best hay bale at the Wayne County Fayre, everything we did with Bill became a wonderful experience. I have so many happy memories that this tribute can only skim the surface.

Bill was always great fun to be with, no summer was complete without a visit from his alter ego, a puppet called Chip. His good humour and laughter were irresistibly contagious, often we would all laugh, just because Bill was laughing, he had the best laugh of anyone I know.

Every year we looked forward to Bill’s latest enthusiasm, whether it was a pond thermometer, a new hot tub, a bird feeder, or teaching us how to coexist with the Japanese Beetles, he was so enthusiastic that we couldn’t help but become interested too.

Bill would often tease me for making friends with the Chipmunks but still made sure that I had the best gourmet seeds and nuts to feed them.

A much loved memory is the day Bill went missing at the Wayne County Fayre, after about ten minutes Laurie started to wonder where he was, my son offered to go look for him and lo and behold there was Bill tucked away behind a caravan sitting on an upturned bucket secretly eating waffles and ice cream enjoying his moment of forbidden treats.

When I had my son also called Laurie, Bill became a wonderful mentor to him, teaching him to swim, barbeque, play tennis, hit a baseball make raspberry jam and sadly to vigorously swat flies with the bright yellow swatter Bill gave him as a summer gift.

He also introduced my son to the Jazz music he loved so much, telling tales of Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke and Sidney Bechet, the music became the soundtrack of our summers.

Bill believed in people and empowered them to believe in themselves, he would tell my son that he was a fine athlete and immediately a not particularly sporty boy would become an enthusiastic swimmer, a tennis player and an ace canoeist.

However, Bill was no saint, he was human through and through, wo betide if you left the screen door open, or over filled the kettle, or tried to rescue flies from a flattened end!

A last precious memory was Christmas 2018 which we were fortunate to spend together with Bill, Laurie and their family and friends.

An antique clock in the apartment was broken, on our arrival Bill said to my son,” I’ve been waiting for you to get the clock started, I know if anyone can do it you can”,

Instantly Laurie (my son) who knew nothing about clocks let alone an antique one became determined to repair it, spending the first hour of our trip painstakingly figuring out how to make it work and then miraculously fixing it.

It was praise enough that Bill believed in him.

I am blessed to have known Bill, he enriched my life, and my son’s life as he generously shared his time and knowledge, welcomed us to New York and Pa and made every summer trip wonderfully special.

I finish this tribute with the words of Peter Pan

***“It is not in doing what you love, but in loving what you do that is the secret of happiness.”*  
― J.M. Barrie,**[**Peter Pan**](https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/1358908)**c**

Bill loved his life, his wife, his family, his friends and his extraordinary work. He made so many of us very happy.

Thank you, Bill