

## **Chip's Life: Proof through the Night**

*(as delivered by Clete Johnson)*

*St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
January 22, 2015*

Wow, look at you all. It's amazing. Good morning, Team Kennett. And it is indeed a glorious morning.

Thank you, Sheila, for your beautifully compelling remembrance. To you and Joe and Crosby, we honor and love and cherish you. We are all here for you today, and we're here for you always.

Bayard, Theresa, Tanner, Sarah, the whole Kennett family and the community of Conway, New Hampshire,

And Linda, Joe, the whole Boyd family and the community of Marks, Mississippi,

This Team holds you and your pain in its warm embrace. We're here for you too. Always will be. We love you.

Not sure exactly how y'all produced these two incredible people, Chip and Sheila, but we thank God that you did.

Team Kennett, we're hurting today, but we are a powerful gathering force. We're ready to execute Chip's marching orders that Sheila just delivered.

This is our first team meeting, so let's plan what we're going to do with the rest of Chip's life.

That's right – the rest of his life.

Just a few weeks after Chip's diagnosis, I went to a funeral for a friend's grandma, a 93-year old force of nature who brought into this world dozens and dozens of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. The sanctuary that day, just like today, was absolutely teeming with life – including the life of the woman who had just passed on.

The pastor said something that resonated with Chip when I shared it with him later that evening. Smitty, you may remember this. I think you and Trevor were there that night too.

He said: “Even **93 years** is not enough. We want **more** time with her **here**, in flesh and blood, and it hurts. But that pain is **love**, it's love transitioning. Her body is gone, but her life lives on. We can't hug her anymore, but we can sure feel her presence. She is still here, isn't she? You feel her, can't you?”

Yes, we could.

He went on: “This transition is hard because it takes real stretching to get our love wrapped all the way around this life that is now so much bigger than it once was.”

The pastor was right: Life is so much bigger than our mortal bodies, these temporary vessels.

Life, simply, is love. To borrow Sheila’s frame, Chip’s life is the combination of what he loves about us, and what we love about him.

And life and love win! Always. They win every match they contest.

Love trumps anger. Just like Chip requested, and, Sheila, we will make sure that is the case.

Life trumps even death! We know that because our love for Chip’s life is more powerful today, right now, following his death, than it has ever been.

Today we carry Chip’s big life in each of us, and it’s our responsibility to make it even bigger.

So here’s what we do: Each of us, we each take note of what we love about him. I mean the *specifics* of his life, the stories and events that made it real, the things about him that will travel with us throughout our own lives.

To be clear, these things are not mere *memories* of Chip. They’re his *life*.

They’re present in tangible reality, right here right now, and on into the future, just as they were when he was here with us.

So long as Chip’s life continues to influence our own lives, *his* life will continue. *His* life is now up to us.

This is most important for Joe and Crosby, these beautiful children whose power and wonder have brightened us in recent days.

Real quick, two anecdotes from this past Saturday: The morning of Chip’s passing, Joe and Crosby and I flew around their house like a rocket ship – we’d launch from the floor like Cape Canaveral and just zoom through the house. It was epic fun, but pretty soon I was worn out and said to Crosby, “Honey I gotta have a little rest, ok?”

She was standing there, all 3 feet of her looking at me with indignation, and she shouted back to me with tremendous energy and authority: “No rest! *Fly!!!*”

This was a rather profound statement given the circumstances, and I asked her, “Crosby, are you actually an angel?”

She smiled her sweet mischievous smile and said matter-of-factly, “Yes.” And then scampered away as I sat there stunned, just having seen an angel in real life – and, I think, a wink from the heavens from Chip.

No rest. Fly.

Later Saturday evening, as some of you Facebookers know, Joe and I were running through the options for watching Tom Brady and the Patriots beat the Colts the next day, including going to watch the game at Big Mike's where all the guys were gathering.

But Joe had a different idea that wasn't on my list.

"I want those guys to come here."

The male, football-loving part of me thought this was the most awesome idea I'd ever heard. The realistic side of me thought, "Oh boy." And feared Sheila.

Nice wink, Chip. Thanks a lot, bud.

Sheila came downstairs after putting Crosby to bed, and Joe told her his plan as I held my breath.

To my great relief, a big smile spread across her face and she said, "So Joe Kennett wants to host Patriots Football Sunday, huh? I think that's a great idea, buddy. It's perfect."

The three of us enjoyed a satisfied pause, and then, with a start, Joe exclaimed, "We're gonna need some beers!"

That's what the kid said, no joke. I have an adult witness. And the boys delivered for him.

Quite clearly, Chip was present in that moment, and the great Patriots victory the next day was a triumph on many levels.

So the reason I bring up those stories is this: The day Chip died, his young children were carrying on his life.

This long march that began before Crosby was even born will be the most formative experience in Joe's and Crosby's lives. That is poignant and difficult, of course it is.

But, also, it abounds with opportunity – and, for us, responsibility.

Team Kennett, it is our job to ensure that decades from now these children will look back on this period as the moment that they learned – from their dad, and their mom, and this Team – how to really live.

All of you here today whose lives have been touched by Chip's life, this is what Sheila asks of you: Think of the specific aspects of Chip's life that you will carry with you. Take some time with this, give it some thought, and write it in a letter. Explain to Joe and Crosby how, specifically, you are keeping this great man, their father, alive in your own life.

I'll get us started with two things in his life that have changed mine, and will be with me always.

First is his irrepressible wit and good humor. Doesn't matter if it's at a Georgia game, a late-night dance party, or going 95 miles an hour to the hospital. It's always funny and great.

Just one example: The very first time Ginny and I met Joe when he was a few days old, he peed on me immediately, within seconds of holding him. Soaked my tie, shirt, jacket, pants, everything, like a waterfall.

As if on cue Chip said, "Don't take it personally man, he does that to every Democrat he meets."

Chip's humor is fun. Uplifting. Powerful. No matter the circumstances. In fact it's at its very best in an ICU with tubes and IVs and pain – the worse, the better. I will carry it with me always, every fun moment I enjoy, every challenge I face. It's part of my life, all of our lives, and his.

And the second thing. Wednesday morning I woke in the ICU in a chair next to Chip, who's laying over there making jokes about catheters, a lot of good material with catheters, nurses rubbing his legs, all sorts of things.

All between coughing spells. He said, "I bet you wish you would never hear a cough again."

I responded, to the contrary – and I don't know why this came up, as this particular thought had never crossed my mind until that very moment – but I said, "No way man, that cough is the sound of courage."

We both choked up at this profound truth. We stayed silent for a long time, like a cliché of two men who can't talk to each other about their feelings. Kind of like me right now I guess. Sorry.

Then finally, Chip abruptly broke the silence with his quick witty joking voice, "That was a good one! Good one. I like it."

That was the last exchange Chip and I ever had about his illness, and it said it all. His courage is a constant fact; the cough and his humor was the proof.

Chip, together with Sheila empowering him, and vice versa, is the most courageous person I have ever known. Their courage is one and the same.

To be clear, I've seen them afraid, and I've seen them in pain. But I have never seen them meet fear or pain with anything but powerful love and relentless life, except for sometimes, hearty laughter.

We all know by now that the very first thing that Chip did upon his diagnosis is he grabbed Sheila's hand, looked her in the eye, and said, "We've **got** this."

**Pure courage.** 200 proof, 100 percent, absolutely pure courage. Sheila knew it was true, and through her courage and his, they made it real – in their lives and ours.

And now we will all take Chip Kennett’s trademarked “we’ve got this” courage with us for the rest of our lives, and make it bigger and more real than it is even today.

I’ll close with a reflection on the last big conversation I had with Chip and Sheila together. It was on New Year’s Day, with college football as a backdrop, and of all things we were talking about the Star Spangled Banner.

Amid banter about Joe America and the Patriots, supporting the troops, other important matters of patriotism, I told them that I had actually recently gone to see the real flag in the Smithsonian, and no kidding as I looked at the bright white lyrics and the tattered 200 year old flag in that dark reverent room, it struck me that the anthem is about a lot more than a flag.

It’s about any triumphant struggle through a perilous fight. I told them, “It’s about **you.**”

We’ve all heard those words a thousand times, but I invite you to read them again closely, and think about Chip and Sheila and what they have taught us about living relentlessly, through all trials, with grace, courage, love and laughter.

In October 2012, it was twilight’s last gleaming. Chip and Sheila were special, we knew that already. In Francis Scott Key’s verse, we so proudly hailed it. But we had absolutely no idea just how special they were until the perilous fight of the past two years.

It’s the **very perils** that they have faced – the drug trials, the scans, the trips to the ICU, the agonizing uncertainty throughout every minute of every day for over two years, the persistent cough – these are the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air that gave proof through the night that the flag was still there, that life and love were still there.

Proof through the night. The broad stripes and bright stars of Chip’s life are still here, so gallantly streaming, still.

Team Kennett, it is now dawn’s early light. Chip’s life has in the most profound sense just begun, and it’s up to us now to make it real – for Joe and Crosby, for Sheila, for the Boyds and the Kennetts.

They need Chip’s life. We all do. So that’s why we’re going to deliver it.

Sheila, Joe, and Crosby’s not in here right now but she’s an angel so she can see it anyway, Boyd family, Kennett family, please look around this sanctuary and behold this Team that you have gathered up.

We want you to know that, to quote a great man, we’ve got this.

We promise you. We’ve got this.