

In Remembrance of George Cannellos Cosmos Pizza Shop & Cars Engines, Character, and Family

By Timothy Stathis

About the time my memory of Cosmos, of Uncle George begins, the simple cardboard sign showed a slice a pizza costing 25 cents, that simple little coin, a quarter, a coin then with enough value that one had to decide whether one could afford a second slice or not. I remember the adults battling the pros and cons of when that price at last, after long years, should be raised to 30 cents, 27 cents and 3 cents tax to be depicted on the next generation sign. Such memories perhaps started about age 7 or so, Cosmos then would have been in operation just 4 years, as I was born in 1960, and Cosmos was born in 1963 on Marshall Street.

It was just our family way of life that almost every Friday, my mother would come home with four or so pizza boxes from Cosmos; the family routine, the week's end tradition. If we went to Cosmos itself, Uncle George was always there; and a few other family members; Cosmos was connected to that puzzle that comprised the picture of our extended family: the Cannellos house, Uncle Tom and Thea Eleni, and Cosmos Pizza Shop.

Uncle George would have been, then at its origin 38 years old, 18 years following the end of World War II, in which he served in the prime of being a young man then. Now at Cosmos' origin in his maturity, he served as Manager and partner of the family Restaurant, which became a place that connected the offspring of "the four sisters," meaning the entire stream of Stathis's and Cannellos's, Vageli and Tony, Vivian and Lucia. These were the families from whose children would work the family business, and be in the presence of, throughout our formative years, Uncle George, the man who lived for us the definition we'd absorb of the word, the idea, the ethic of "work."

We knew it wasn't just us whom he was conscious of. It was all those other people too. The other workers at Cosmos, all the customers; Uncle George constantly the man in charge, the man running the operation, the man everyone talked to. Cosmos and Uncle George tied to one another and tied into all our lives.

At that time too, car engines were approachable in comprehension in the logical sequence of reactions occurring in a combustible engine. The parts therein, each part, every bolt, every operational system, was understood by Uncle George; each car engine unique in its original design particulars, and each dependent on the owner's care of it. They were approachable because understanding of the engine had some logical sequence to its workings, fully comprehended from start to finish by Uncle George, such that, then, while approaching a problem therein, he could speak to the operation needing to be done to analyze or fix it, and the boys of the family could be drawn-in to follow along, sometimes following, sometimes understanding, always watching Uncle George the magician getting it going again. As everyone in this extended family got a car as soon as possible by age, and no one could ever afford a new one, the lot of used ones ranged in quality from the ready-for-the-junk-heap and on up, mostly the lower of that range, and thus everyone having problems all the time. Uncle George was in that part of everyone's sense of their quality of life: their mobility. He could be seen emerging with his tool box in every driveway where there was family member or Cosmos employee, hands and arms and face ready for the greasy outcome of attempt to help. We all depended on him, and could always count on him.

He was master, too, of our recreation by the water, Uncle George with his boat, our bony legs flopping wooden skies in every twisted fashion possible, training for the mastery of water's surface pulled by a rope. He probably held those skis in place, gripping struggling bodies clinging to him in the water, of every relative and friend of relative for the whole generation of our youth, until we got our own boat...well, never quite our own; Uncle George going shoulder high in the water at least twice a week wrench in hand fixing our engine.

Many of the boys of the family, and those of Cosmos employees drawn-in by force of his magnetic interest in it, accompanied Uncle George to his Sunday passion, the Drag Races. I heard the story told that from the beginning he would have instead pursued stock-car racing, with this passion for the automobile and the adrenalin of speed and the personal challenge to push one's limits therein, but his loving better-half, Thea Corny, put her foot down on that, that which she felt was too dangerous, a widow-making hobby not permissible. He acquiesced on her behalf and so his course was set as the future legend of the drag strip of central New York.

I personally missed that whole cycle of his life up-close, as I tended toward art than the machine, though all my brothers and male-cousins and other relatives delved into it at Uncle George's side. But the ambience of his life connected to it was still awe-striking to me as a young boy, in visiting his house for family gatherings and marveling at the race-car trophies, of every size, stacked on every available table-top.

It is wide-spread agreement that we all absorbed something of his driving-style, his demeanor behind the wheel, just by having had the experience of riding with him through the Syracuse city streets; the power of his engine enjoyed at "the starting line" of every stop light. Since none had his level of skill, though, attempting to mimic him was therefore a dangerous prospect we each eventually had to work out of our blood. All retaining though, that good quality of a confidence behind the wheel.

It was an unforgettable experience to have ridden in his car, as unforgettable as the vision of him peering under the hood of one's own "junk." And speaking of memory, here, his memory of what each one drove, and likely that meaning every family member and every regular Cosmos customer, not just presently but the last several cars each one owned which he had a hand in at one time or other, he'd conversationally check-up on the health of the vehicle, reminisce with you about a previous one at its eccentricities, your identity often connected in his mind to your connection to your vehicle.

But that connection was not just that, his memory of you not just that, he had in interest in everyone and any subject you cared to share; whether it be while on the couch watching a football game or more often, while he stretched the dough and flipped the pizzas, holding conversation individually with three people at once while maintaining four orders in his mind, and directing the help to attend to each customer.

He'd dress-up for a wedding, a funeral, for church and was comfortable in the company of anyone. He'd give his famous "Tarzan" call and jump into the lake with the children, or his woody wood-pecker laugh could be heard at Cosmos resounding from the front by the pizza oven, down through the entire shop, relieving the staff's stress in busy tiring hours.

Somehow he found time to be there for family events and he never ever appeared to not wish he was there. Once among the family, he was all family, and every conversation enjoyed. How many hours he worked the pizza shop, how many extra hours filling-in for others in addition to his own 80 hour weeks; how many extra hours fixing something so everything would be ready to start the day aright for all the customers, more hours than logically seemed humanly possible.

He was always there when I'd arrive for my one weekend night's 10-hour shift, 10 hours standing on one's feet and part of the whole service to customers that would stream through the restaurant. Who knows how many hours before that he had arrived to make sure everything was ready for the thrust into the long night. So many details to attend to in every aspect of the operation, he contained it all in his head and his constantly moving hands to make it all work.

It was a place of people, the faces of the workers over the years, the constantly changing personalities of the long parade of pretty college student waitresses, the delivery guys, and the steady family members, and a few institutions like John Voros finishing his day shift and Leon coming on for the night. The flow of people, and the juke box, ever changing, ever the same, people packing the booths and the busy "rushes," the night wearing on, the food ever abuzz on the grill, the shout of orders, the pizza oven constantly opening and shutting, the students bunching-up at the front looking down for a seat to open, and then the "Roll 'em out!" blaring from George's voice, a reverberation seeming to be in a subtle control of all the moving aspects of the place and minds of everyone present.

"Hey George" you'd hear, then from him: "How's that junk you're driving?" in response. Or during the 60's and 70's: "Hair-cut!" commanded in response to a greeting from someone he knew he could tease. A thousand times over in a night, "Hey George," and he'd respond to each one with a sincere recognition about the individual passing through the door, sometimes a longer conversation while simultaneously flipping, spinning pizzas in the air.

The night would press on.

One wouldn't have time to feel tired or yet the aching feet, nor even time to notice the clock turning the hours away until that inevitable 2 AM striking hour. It was still usually jammed with people as the last served started their meal, then those there already trickled out, the employees now, nothing new to make, beginning the busy routine of clean-up, which itself had 100 tasks that the next day might be set afresh. Uncle George overseeing it all. Another, "Roll 'em out!" not this time to clear the way for new customers, but to get the stragglers on their way; the bribed Policeman providing a bit of security now hanging-out eating a sandwich, part of the closing routine.

Slowly the long night's conclusion approached as this and that employee changed the white shirt or apron for his/her coat and ventured out with a simple good-night to George, the young beauties often giving him a hug prior to exiting with their 6 ft. 4 in. football player boy-friends, but their respect, their love for George so sincere. How many he knew, how many he hugged throughout the years, God only knows.

Then, close to 3 AM, a breadth and a sigh, the final act Uncle George putting the cash in a paper bag and putting it in the sandwich fixings refrigerator; the lights turned out over the empty rows of booths, counter chairs, and the spotlessly clean serving alley, no orders now to bring the area to life; just he and I alone as I'd follow him down the back stairway after the alarm was set, we'd exit to the old blue Cosmos van and begin the drive through the empty night.

Syracuse asleep and a van moving through the night, the man of Cosmos and his nephew, a nights' work done, and done well.

I can't remember anything we spoke of then, and lack of that doesn't matter. What does matter is remembering that on such night, his final obligation, after serving a thousand that night, was bringing me to my door; that we rode together, that I was part of what he gave his life to. And when I wasn't there, the million nights for over 50 years he rode home through a sleeping Syracuse stillness, if the thought ever crossed his mind of why he does what he does, the answer was certainly sensed as duty to and love for the occupants of 400 Robineau Rd.

He was given the gift of the world through his children, as they, in later years, provided the reason to travel, to enjoy the company of his off-spring and their families, and gave him the tickets by which he traveled and experienced the other side of the world, he taking it all in without surprise, but with his characteristic marvel at everything new, different, and unique.

It is almost as though he comprised a little of everything, everything absorbed through others with his wide-open interest in everything, balancing the ways, beliefs, and interests of others within himself. It was as though he himself was the embodiment of balance and moderation of all and everything of everyone he encountered. I can remember standing at the Cosmos counter, eating my slice of pizza and hearing him philosophize: “They tell you now this or that is good for you, yesterday it was something else, and tomorrow they’ll tell you something different! What to believe? Moderation, right Timmy? ...just don’t do too much of this or that ...don’t harm yourself or others, and then we’ll all be alright ...isn’t that what its all about?”

I saw Uncle George three times when I was back in Syracuse last summer, the summer prior to the winter of his passing. First at Cosmos itself on a slow customer-empty afternoon, enabling greeting him and his eternally-loving wife, both coincidentally arriving where I brought my wife and little sons for a late lunch; we bunched for a family picture all together, the pizza oven in view in reflection off the mirror, arm wrapped around his beloved and devoted wife. What a smile he had.

Some days later the loving couple dropped by over at Hancock Dr. We placed a chair for Thea Corny on the front lawn and he and I leaned on the car parked there and shot-the-breeze on this or that topic on a sunny day just meant for visiting.

Two days before leaving the city, my father and I woke to dress for Church. We entered that subdued silence, candle-lit entrance area, doing the Cross, bowing or feinting a kiss to the Holy Mother and Child icon, and passed into the interior Holy realm, the ancient liturgy penetrating vast space, the incense striking the senses adding to the transforming of one’s emotions. We took our place toward the back, perhaps 5 rows from the exit, so my father could leave early without disturbance to the congregation.

Not long after our settling-in in reverent attention to the service, to the arching omnipresent connection with Jesus Christ’s image/presence staring down from the ceiling above; the ever long-suffering Apostles’ images conveying their earnestness to pass on the Truth down through the ages to reach us here today; the rituals of the Priest in the front as humble servant, our representative and mediator to the Holy images of the Beings of Angels and Saints in the arching Church front, there then appeared on the periphery of my vision the entrance of Uncle George, arm-and-arm with Thea Corny, supporting each other’s steps down the center isle and taking their place half a dozen pews ahead, hardly another soul in-between occupying those rows, perhaps only twenty percent of the seating space occupied throughout the church; reverent Greeks sparse today. They did not see us.

As I took-in the impression, it appeared to me as though the arch containing all that was the church centered these two in my attention against the backdrop of the ambient holiness of everything else. How they held one another and reverently listened to the word of God.

I thought about them there, my aunt and my uncle, their long lives, the life of this family of which we were in a way together contained within: they, and my father and I facing the alter of God on this summer Sunday morning, humbly absorbed, in our small but unique part, before the omnipresent meaning of life. A special moment, that perception, that image of Uncle George and Thea Corny there, a crystal clear memory, a picture of loved ones in the presence of eternal holiness.

In the latter part of one’s life on Earth, one begins to wonder at the legacy one has given to the world. For Uncle George, his gift, his legacy is that of “character,” a kind of integrity, a kind of outlook on life, a kind of ethic about work and duty, and a personality unique in the memory of all who knew him. George Cannellos, a presence and strength of CHARACTER born of some ancient Spartan past, stretching into the present spectrum of years that he was among us, and living on unto the future yet to be touched by his presence through all who were permanently influenced by him. We loved him.