

Michael

2 July 1963 – 10 September 1985



"He united a large heart to first-class brains. He was the best of friends, the best of comrades and good companions, and as such he will live in the thoughts of all his contemporaries."

It must seem strange at first that anyone should write a memoir of the life of a young man who was tragically killed at the age of twenty-two and had no chance to fulfil his potential in life. There are bound to be relatively few events to record, few achievements to document. Much that is set down may appear commonplace and unremarkable.

Yet, to those who knew Michael Sims it will not seem so strange. There are people who are important not for what they do but for what they are. There are those who develop remarkable human qualities which are a source of joy to those around them, quite early in life. Such people are an inspiration to those with whom they come into contact and acquire a significance out of proportion to their actions. Such a person was Michael.

As so it is that we must attempt to record here in mere words the nature of this young man, as a memoir for his friends and, hopefully, to interest others in his life and ideals. The method to be employed will be a narrative one, interspersed with comment and anecdote.

Michael was born on 2nd July 1963 at Ruislip, Middlesex, England. His father, Park, was a United States Air Force officer who had been stationed in Britain for four years and had met and married Jill Smith, an English girl from Flackwell Heath, Buckinghamshire.

Thus Michael was born, as he was to remain, a citizen of two countries. Six weeks later the family moved to the United States - specifically, to Dayton, Ohio - where Park was posted to attend an Air Force graduate school. (The family's departure had been delayed by Michael's imminent birth.)

Michael was to live in the United States for the first fifteen years of his life, but he imbibed both cultures. Long summer visits to England to stay with his grandparents ("Nanny" and "Grampy") in Flackwell Heath took place at least every other year. Moreover, his mother Jill carried her English heritage with her. One of the more amusing symbols of this was one of those now old-fashioned, large, English prams: neighbours in Dayton thought it cruel that baby Michael should be left outside in it in all weathers, being unaware of its insulating qualities.

More significantly, Jill took with her English nursery rhymes, stories, and songs. In the minds of Michael's family the folk song "My Bonny Lies Over The Ocean" which Jill's father had sung to her and her sister, and which Jill sang to her children as a lullaby, will forever be associated with Michael. And those who attended either of his memorial services will never forget the profoundly moving effect of it being sung as the coffin was carried out of the church at the end.

An American father and an English mother; the heritage, lifestyles, and ways of thought of two homelands °Michael grew up to love and have pride in them both. Years later he was to observe that to Americans he sounded English but in Britain people remarked on his American accent. Yet, the truth is that he was an outsider in neither culture. He carried them both and, by being himself, he moved with aplomb between them. It is an ability shared by his sister. Perhaps in part as a result of this background, Michael was to develop a genuine interest in and enthusiasm for other cultures. Countries as diverse as Spain and India were, as we shall see, in due course to be adopted. He approached different societies with a genuine spirit of enquiry and wonderment. Michael was not alone in this approach, but he was a member of a too-small minority.

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The nature of Michael's father's career in the U.S. Air Force was such that his family were bound to move around fairly regularly. In 1965 he was posted to the Pentagon and the family came to live in Alexandria, Virginia, near to Washington DC. There they met another Anglo-American couple, Gene and Jean Lear, who became trusted friends. Jean was a teacher of remedial reading and, wanting to teach, for once, an obviously bright child to read, asked if she could try to teach Michael. She still tells the story of how, at age four, he learned to read her entire beginners' book in a single afternoon. After a year in nursery school, Michael entered school at the normal age, in the United States, of six. The year, 1969, was even more important for another reason - the birth of his sister, JaneEna. Michael was delighted; he had been consulted about having a baby sister before the pregnancy (there was never to be any doubt about it being a sister) and when told that his mother was expecting he had replied in wonder and delight, "You're kidding!" He worshipped his sister from the day of her birth and remained devoted to his beloved "Neener" for the whole of his life.

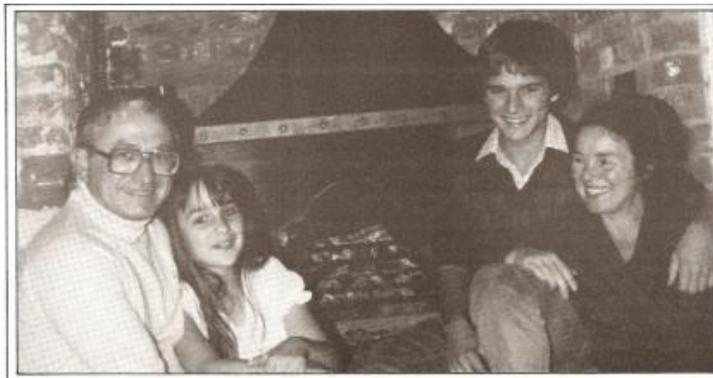
In 1970 Park Sims was posted to the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory of the University of California and the family moved to Livermore. There Michael's school placed him on the Gifted Children Program, designed to give an enriched educational experience. There, also, he learned to play soccer and to swim. He desperately wanted a piano but his father refused, so Michael taught himself to play by persuading the girl next door who had both a piano and weekly lessons to go over her lessons with him. His father was so impressed to hear Michael play when the family was visiting some friends, and to learn of Michael's initiative, pursued so single-mindedly, that he delighted Michael by buying a piano for the family.

In 1973 the family moved again, to Colorado Springs, Colorado where Park was to take up a teaching post at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Near the Academy the Sims built a house on Red Rock Ranch, an area developed by a retired Air Force Colonel named Hugh Nevins and his wife MaryLou. The Nevins became dear friends to the

Sims, and Hugh Nevins ("Colonel" to Michael) became an important influence in Michael's life, as did the Ranch itself.

The wild, natural beauty of the Red Rock Ranch area provided a magnificent backdrop to a range of interests and activities which were bound to fascinate a normal, intelligent boy growing from ten to fifteen. In short, the Ranch came into Michael's life at exactly the right time. He loved the wildlife (especially the ingenious, industrious beavers) and his interest in the study of living things was captured. Colonel taught Michael to ride horses bareback, gave him secret driving lessons across the prairies in "Betsy" the Ranch truck, and taught him to ski in the nearby Rocky Mountains.

Colonel was interested in teaching blind children to ski. He recruited Michael to help, giving instructions as Michael, blindfolded, learned the difficulties of skiing as a blind person would experience them. This is now standard practice in the training of ski instructors for the blind, a program which has since grown to international proportions.



Michael became a superb skier and a fine instructor. The activity of skiing was fun in itself and he loved it. The opportunity to help others to share in the enjoyment - people who would not otherwise have had the chance appealed to one of the

most important facets of Michael's character: a genuine, deep, "unsloppy" concern for others. Never expressed in a sentimental way, always shown on a practical level, no one who got to know Michael could ever doubt the compelling force of this desire. He was constitutionally incapable of remaining untouched by the genuine problems, difficulties, or troubles of others, whether on a large or a small scale. At the same time, his own independence of spirit meant that he found it impossible to understand those who would not try to help themselves. On the surface he often seemed intolerant on this point; at a deeper level these feelings did not cancel out his basic concern. Sometimes people had to be helped in spite of themselves!

It is not the least of the tragedies of Michael's premature death that it came before these characteristics had fully developed and become synthesised. What a doctor the middle-aged Michael would have been! What a "grand old character" he would have been by the end!

Yet those who knew him are grateful to have been touched by the pure gold of this aspect of his character, even in its unfinished state. It remains an example to ponder, to provide self-searching and, above all, to celebrate. For surely we are right to celebrate a concern for others which was undramatic, not self-seeking, not cloying, nor tear-jerking, but rather practical, sensible, active, and uncompromising. The world

does not have an overabundance of such people and we are all the poorer if we forget them.

In 1978 the Sims managed to achieve a long-standing family ambition: an Air Force posting back to England. They moved to Suffolk, living first in the small town of Framlingham and then buying a home in the nearby village of Marlesford.



When they returned to England Jill and Park decided they wanted Michael and JaneEna to go to the local English schools, rather than the American ones available on the nearby USAF base. So Michael came to the then Mills Grammar School in Framlingham. Fifteen was a

difficult age to move into the English educational system, coming half way through the two-year "O-level" course. It was decided that Michael would have to go into the year one below his age group, to start O-level from the beginning. This was a hard decision to accept, since it meant for him an extra year at school, but Michael adapted to the necessity and settled down to work.

What impressed his teachers was not only his obvious ability and adaptability, but his unflinching enthusiasm. For example, Michael had studied American history, but never the European history which formed part of his new course. It was not long before he pronounced European history to be "neat", one of his most positive words of approbation. What was so encouraging for a teacher was that this view was obviously sincere. The history course began by studying Bismark, and forever afterwards Michael would tease his history teacher by trying to compare the methods of the two. It was not a comparison the latter always enjoyed, which naturally added to the fun.

More important examples of Michael the student can be found elsewhere from these years. He had not studied either of the languages, French and German, taught at his new school. Michael preferred the Spanish he had started to learn in Colorado and got School permission to pursue it on his own. So he arranged weekly "Spanish sessions" with a local family, the McLennans, who had lived for many years in Guatemala. Andrew McLennan, although a year ahead of Michael, had become a close school friend. His mother agreed to tutor Michael.

Michael also acquired a Spanish pen friend, Jose Manuel Martinez Zamora, in Madrid, and exchanged with him both letters and school-vacation visits. To further sharpen his skills, Michael devoured Spanish magazines and paperback books, often reading them in bed at night. And in 1978 he began a series of visits to the Spanish village of Frigiliana in the mountains near Malaga where his mother's sister June and "Uncle Pedro (Peter)" were building a villa. Michael became June and Peter's interpreter with the local labourers and formed several friendships among the people of the village, especially with Rosario and Antonio Cortes Acosta, two young people near his own age. Not only did Michael eventually pass his O-level in Spanish, but more importantly he developed a real love of Spain, its language, and its people.

Shortly after his death Michael's family went to Frigiliana to recuperate with June and Peter. Perhaps Michael's feelings about that place are best expressed through the words of his father written in a letter at that time:

" ... mostly we are just thinking about Michael: Wouldn't he have loved this weather! Didn't he love this part of Spain, these hills, this sea, these people, the language! Wouldn't he be speaking Spanish right now to old Antonio the gardener! And both grinning with delight!"

Not only in Spain, but wherever he might be, Michael loved finding someone he could converse with in Spanish. Years later, as a medical student in London, he attended Spanish classes in the University for the sheer fun of it (and prepared all the assignments!), and he delighted in eavesdropping on the many Spanish-speaking *au pair* girls who travelled on his branch of the London underground.

Michael also loved the sciences. Above all, in his a-level years he enjoyed "Control Technology". The fun of this subject, taught by an excellent teacher who was a real enthusiast himself, was that instead of only learning facts, the student had to apply scientific principles to the solution of actual electro-mechanical problems. Designing viable, working systems required rigorous thought, scientific imagination, and persistence. Michael loved it; the course might have been tailor-made for him.

In short, Michael was not the kind of clever boy who either rejects school as unstimulating or, on the other hand, merely does enough to pass examinations as a staging-post to later success. Rather, he found interest in what he did; he enthused at the prospect of learning. This was not seeking to impress teachers; it was a natural expression of his character and personality. And so it was that this same attitude was to be seen in each of the later stages of his academic career.

Michael gained passes in all ten of his O-level subjects at the end of his second year in what had by now become Thomas Mills High School. He entered the Sixth Form and undertook four subjects for A-level: Physics, Chemistry, Biology, and Mathematics (which he always insisted on shortening to the American "math" rather than the British "maths", having long, esoteric arguments with his contemporaries on the reasons why). A year later he was named to be Head Boy of the School. Michael decided after discussion with his family that these additional responsibilities in his final year would make four subjects too many. He agonised over which of the beloved quartet would have to be dropped. After writing to five universities for advice (all replied to say he should drop one but it didn't matter which), he eventually opted against Physics, with genuine regret. He went on to pass his remaining three with grades of A, B, B.

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School is not just about academic study: it is also concerned with education in the broadest sense, within a community of people. How did Michael fit into this community? What part did he play in its affairs?

Suffolk people are not renowned for accepting newcomers quickly. English school pupils do not always take kindly to those who exhibit an unfashionable degree of

enthusiasm. It is a measure of Michael's personal qualities that soon after his arrival in Framlingham he had established himself firmly in the community of students. He was charming; he had a great sense of fun; he was modest about his abilities; he was sociable, not restricting himself to a single group of people, although he certainly had a special group of particular friends; and, perhaps above all, he had a tremendous sense of loyalty. These characteristics broke down barriers. Together they constituted what might be described as a "gift for friendship". However strong the bulwarks of prejudice or reserve which others might build, they were seldom strong enough to resist the combined assault of Michael's qualities, once employed.

Perhaps some short quotations from letters written after Michael's death by people who were not amongst his closest friends at School best illustrate this point:

"Although I didn't know Michael personally very well, I certainly remember him as a very warm and friendly person who would always brighten up a dull moment and was there to turn to for advice whenever it was needed."

"Even in the short time I knew Michael it was easy to see from his personal qualities why he had the respect of everybody."

"Although it has probably been said countless times ... I would like to say how much of a shock (Michael's death) has been ... The eulogy (at the memorial service) brought to my knowledge a great many things I didn't know about Michael and only served to make me wish I had known him better."

Thomas Mills High School still maintains the system of appointing a Head Girl and a Head Boy, with Deputies, and a team of prefects. These posts are far from being merely symbolic or devoid of work. In fact, these student officials play a key part in the administration of the School and, especially, of the Sixth Form. Their advice is sought on many matters and their views carry weight.

They are chosen by an arcane procedure. The views of their contemporaries, of the staff, and of the retiring officials are all sought and considered. In Michael's year, both the male and the female posts were easy to fill, as all the various groups, by clear majorities, pointed to the same candidates. Hazel Clark was chosen as Head Girl and Michael became Head Boy.

Michael and Hazel took their duties very seriously. They organised events. They gave advice when asked. They came forward - either singly or together - to give unsought advice when they thought it necessary. They were highly successful. "Haze", as he affectionately called her, was Michael's kindred spirit and became one of his nearest and dearest friends.

Michael loved being Head Boy, but with characteristic modesty he always wondered why he had been chosen. In truth he was a "natural" for the job; all of the qualities alluded to in this sketch ideally fitted him for it, and the position itself helped him to develop further. It also provided a fitting climax to his school career.

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At some point during his Sixth Form years, Michael decided that he wanted to become a doctor. It is hard to think of a more appropriate choice, combining as it does academic vigour and concern for others at the highest level. With his three good A-levels and his qualities of character, which must have been obvious at the mandatory selection interviews, Michael received offers for a place at each of his first three choices for medical school. He accepted a place at University College, London, and began his medical education in October 1982.

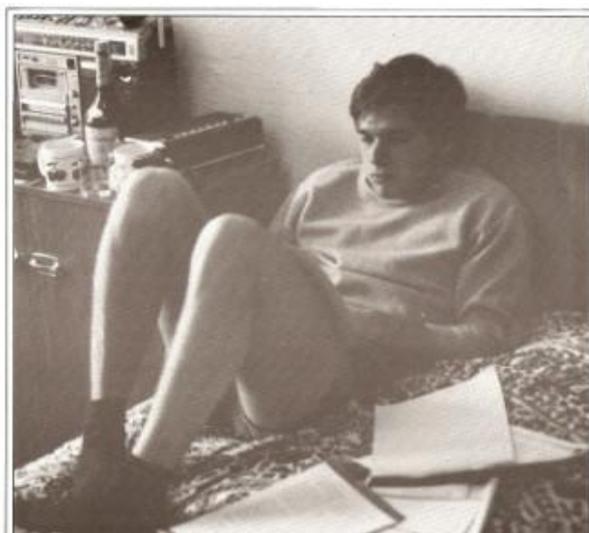


Not all clever people are well suited to university life. Some are too immature to cope successfully with a way of life in which, suddenly, nearly all controls over behaviour are removed. Others cannot cope easily

with looking after themselves. Some give up work for the social life; others pursue work with such punctual zeal that they fail to enjoy any social life at all.

Michael did not fit into any of these categories. He worked hard but he also enjoyed himself. In fact, he had a good social life with a happy band of mates. In his First Year he lived in a hall of residence and took part in many activities, including a sponsored student hitch-hike to the Eiffel Tower in Paris, in aid of leukaemia research; he successfully appeared atop the Tower in a surgical gown at the prescribed time. Also in his First Year he performed in the annual medical-student Revue, a satirical stage production, typically aimed at the characteristics of various members of the faculty. In his Second Year he was chosen as Director of the Revue and guided all its details from scriptwriting and staging to organising the band, sound equipment, and catering. After its success, the cast presented him with a folding canvas director's chair, one of his most prized possessions.

He revelled in activities such as Rag Week, the Annual Balls, and the annual Guinness marathon for medical students, and he made as many visits as he could to the theatres of London's West End.



For his Second Year and beyond he rented a house in Golders Green with a group of fellow medical students (Gareth, Ian, Neil, and Peter); their life was not a dull one!

As well as making new friends at university such as his housemates, Andres (another medical student), Simon (a computer science student),

and many others, Michael kept in touch with his former schoolmates from Framlingham; indeed, he became something of an "information centre" for them all, keeping track of them and their news as they pursued their widespread activities in universities or industry. Many of them visited him in Golders Green, "dossing down" on his sofa or floor.

But his life was far from entirely social. Along with his housemates he studied hard and did well academically. He thoroughly enjoyed his medical studies. In his First Year he was fascinated with the dissection of a human cadaver, which he reportedly did with great skill (and which he would describe in enthusiastic detail, especially to those who were slightly squeamish). On the debit side, what he disliked most was the Sociology course in his Second Year.



Like other medical students, Michael had the option of spending an extra year in his studies by doing a BSc degree in the Third Year. After much discussion with his parents about the finances, he decided to take the extra year and chose to pursue a degree in Immunology. He undertook a research project under Dr

Paul M. Kaye of University College, London. The project involved a massive literature search and much work with biological cultures, growing them in carefully controlled conditions, and observing them through a microscope. Michael threw himself into the project with his usual enthusiasm, devouring mountains of manuscripts and journal reprints, working in the laboratory until nearly midnight for many weeks to overcome technical difficulties which arose. That same scientific interest manifested earlier at Thomas Mills School was aroused again.

It was an original piece of research, an aspect of Dr Kaye's long-term studies, and proved a real challenge to Michael. He only just finished the project in time to earn his degree (a II-I). He was both proud and relieved. After his death his results were published in the journal *Clinical and Experimental Immunology* with this note:

"This manuscript is dedicated to the memory of Michael Sims, whose scientific career was tragically short."

During his Third Year, in 1985 and while pursuing his Immunology degree, Michael met an attractive young nurse who worked in the University College Hospital, Sarah Fishburn. Explaining that he was too busy for a normal date, he invited her along to an evening session in his laboratory: "Come and see my macrophages," as they were later to joke. During that year Sarah became his very special girlfriend and there developed between them a warm and loving relationship that lasted the rest of his life.

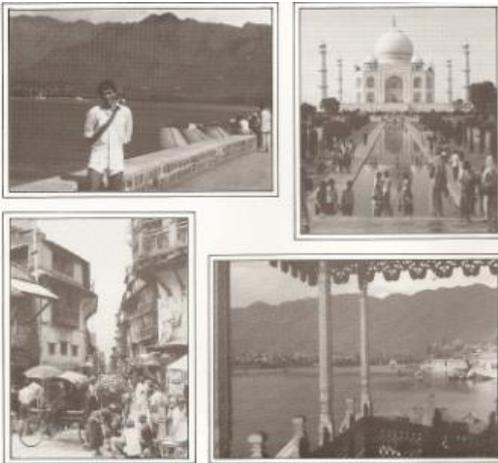
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Michael's life was packed with interest and not even vacations could be wasted. In his First Year he travelled to the United States during the Christmas break and in the summer afterwards went to Spain for a visit with his pen friend Jose.

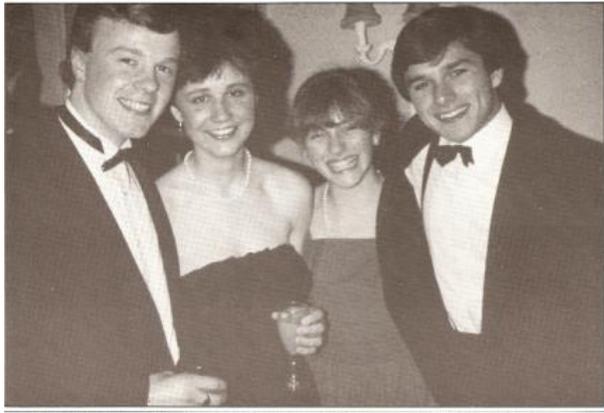
In his Second Year he went to Spain again during the Easter break and spent the longer vacation in that summer of 1984 touring India with his School friend, fellow Spanish-speaker, and predecessor as Head Boy, Andrew McLennan. Starting in Delhi, they travelled by bus and train around the country visiting, among other places, the Taj Mahal and Kashmir, where Michael was delighted to stay in a houseboat on Lake Dal in Srinagar. A brief visit to Nepal before returning to Delhi for the flight home completed their travels. Michael returned with his backpack bulging with gifts for his family and friends. Typically, he had denied himself expenditures enroute in his concern for others. A small emerald ring bought for his mother at great sacrifice (she had always wanted one) reduced her to tears, and has become her most treasured possession.

The trip made a tremendous impression on both young men and Michael's friends had seldom heard him as enthusiastic as he was in describing both the beauties of India and its terrible problems of poverty. He was fired with determination to try to do something to help Third World problems. Characteristically, one scheme which commended itself to him was to do his Fourth Year "elective" - a voluntary spell of medical study abroad - in a Third World country. He fancied Peru (which had the advantage of being Spanish speaking).



Easter break of his Third Year found Michael teaching skiing again, this time in Austria where he landed a holiday job as ski instructor to a group of students from Dover Grammar School for Girls. He wrote that it was just like being back at Mills Grammar: "same girls, same teachers, same excitement at learning."

He decided to spend the summer vacation at the end of his Third Year travelling to the United States, to visit family and friends. This would be his last long holiday free of the commitment of hospital work and he had seen very little of his American grandparents for several years. He invited an old friend from Thomas Mills High School days, Graham Uff, who had never been to America, to go with him.



They arranged an itinerary to visit all the places where Michael had lived, plus other places where he had relatives. After writing ahead and arranging to stay with friends or family in each place, they visited the Lears in Virginia near Washington DC, Michael's uncle and family in Dallas, Texas, Hugh and MaryLou Nevins on Red Rock Ranch in Colorado, and family friends Doris Newton and the

Lowells in Livermore, California. From San Francisco Michael and Graham drove a rental car across Nevada and Arizona to the home of Michael's grandparents in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

The trip lasted a month. Graham had to leave on the 9th of September 1985, as he had to get back to his job. Michael was to stay another week and spend it with his grandparents. Michael drove with Graham from Albuquerque to the airport in Denver, Colorado where Graham caught the prearranged flight home. Graham recorded in his journal of the trip:

"We agreed to meet up as soon as Michael got back from the U.S. next week, gave each other a bear hug, and I got on the plane."

Tragically, this commonplace remark was to acquire a terrible poignancy. Michael had a long drive alone back to Albuquerque. After stopping again at Red Rock Ranch for a last lunch with the Nevins, he set out. Enroute a failed water pump on the car forced an overnight stop at a motel in Trinidad, Colorado. During that night of 9th/10th September 1985, Michael was murdered in his room. He was 22 years old.

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The death of a young person is always particularly sad. Death by illness or accident is hard enough for those left behind to bear, but murder adds an extra horror which is too awful to contemplate. How could something so terrible, so meaningless, so wasteful happen, and to someone like Michael?

There is, of course, no answer to such questions. The shock, the grief, the anger provoked by this event were real and deep, and remain so, not just for his family but for many others whose lives were touched by his.

One other reaction manifested itself. A determination that Michael's murderer would not have the last word. No one could bring Michael back to life, but there was no need to let him be forgotten.

Michael was very special. Although brief, his life was not wasted. It was said of military journalist and historian, B. H. Liddel Hart, that he was "the captain who taught generals". Michael was a boy with something to teach most of his elders about living.

It is the living Michael that we celebrate, not a plaster saint. It is the quality of his humanity - unhappily such a rare thing - that we seek to record. In the words of his eulogy, read at his memorial service:

"We who knew Michael are proud of him. And we are proud of having known him. And we are, and should be, inspired by his life."

We wish also to share these feelings with those who did not know him. Thus, the Michael Sims Memorial Fund.