

The Essential Bill Griffin

GlaxoSmithKline Senior Vice President
Pine Hill Country Club, Pine Hill, New Jersey
May 25, 2002.

By WYNNE ALEXANDER

©copyright 2002

Thank you all for joining me here today. Family, dearest good friends and colleagues. You may not know it, but your presence here means more than meets the eye. This is not just another party. Yeah, yeah, I know, it's Bill retirement party. Well it *is*-but it's so much more. This is an important commemoration of the quiet heroism, understated elegance and generosity that typifies the essential Bill Griffin.

You know, in this day and age, a lot of businessmen do well. All those stock options, 401-K's and year-end bonuses see to that. So on the material plane, when a certain type of people retire, their resumes, are all strikingly similar. Bill's would go something like this: Outstanding High School scholar-athlete, varsity football, straight A's, valedictorian, snappy dresser. Goes to college, BA from Cheyney in political science. Decorated Viet Nam War Vet. Comes home, earns MBA at Temple University. Leaves job at Sears because he's snatched up by a major player in corporate America. Ascends to Regional Vice President and he makes a ton of money.

What separates Bill from all those other guys is the extraordinary level of excellence that is woven throughout all his endeavors and the equally difficult obstacles that were in the way. What distinguishes Bill is the grace with which he jumped those hurdles, never letting on, then or now, that the goal was anything less than attainable. That's what makes him a great leader. That's why as of last week, 205 people were following him, staking their careers and their family's welfare on Bill's leadership. His Socratic methods of building business acumen ought to be a model for every business team in operation today. His record of molding successful executives would be a feather in the cap of any tenured college professor.

Bok High School Valedictorian-- well some might say "of course he was". After all Bill always loved to read and was curious by nature. Yes but that's a lot easier for some than others. You see, Bill had a lot on his plate. The guy was basically the man of the house at the age of 11. He had a number of jobs by then, he was always working. He was his mother's second-in-command and he was on his way to being one of the best older brothers I've ever heard of.

Bill's mother was at work a lot since she, alone, was raising the three Griffin kids. So when she was away, Bill was in charge. This included making breakfast featuring the world's largest pancakes. Apparently Bill's love of the literary extended into a love of the *literal*, as well. They are called *PAN* Cakes. So each one of Bill's pancakes took up the whole pan. I understand just one of those bad boys sucked up an entire bottle of syrup. But it's hard to get the best grades, run the house, work before and after school, and be a gourmet chef—at 11 years old.

As a little kid, he displayed a generosity one could only describe as divine. He's a little kid, but he's got his salary and he takes that salary and the little sister and little brother to the movies every week. Every Saturday, all day. He treats them to the works- movies, the popcorn, the candy, everything--all on Bill. All *with* Bill.

His time, his thoughts, as well as the money. He could have been with his friends. He could have sent the younger kids to the theater. But he was *with* them, every week.

Many here know what it's like to have people missing in our lives. By being *with* them, Bill imparted a sense of well-being, of fun, love, a sense of plenty - all huge blessings.

I mentioned his stellar career at GlaxoSmithKline, gigantic global drug conglomerate that they are. Was he snatched up, wooed and massaged-well not exactly. When Bill joined Smith Kline in 1976, the company was a member in good standing of the Lily White Corporate America Club. Drug companies are highly conservative, which is a polite way of saying they were one of the last bastions of institutionalized racism. Bill was one of only two black district managers in the entire country. This is a big country---Two! But they progressed. They made him a Vice President and for years, he was the only one of those in the whole country. One! Did I mention this is a big company? And Indiana was no picnic either. They were not yet worshipping Reggie Miller, if you get my drift. It was a whites-only world when Bill got there. White sales force, white clients, hell, even the pills were white. It gives new meaning to the phrase "white sale".

Bill was a pioneer. He was a trailblazer, coming in through the Human Resources door, taking up 'Sales' in Indianapolis and before he's through, he's a vice president in charge of hundreds of people. NONE OF WHICH----hurt his golf game. And yes, he's still a snappy dresser.

But home was never forgotten. Even when he was at Sears, Bill reached back to the neighborhood and gave June's friends jobs. He made a dream into reality for a sister who did not realize her prom dress might stress the family's finances. Bill's heart went out to her's. And from his lifetime of jobs making deliveries as a nine year old on a milk truck, ice truck and wood truck-Bill's savings delivered the dress for Dee. That's some delivery.

Bill's mother says Bill always felt he could make things happen. The apparent reality of his circumstances never influenced his vision. On the contrary, his vision fueled the ability to change those circumstances, until they matched his vision. Even to the point of growing up without a father and yet becoming an exemplary father and father figure. When asked how he came to such a transcendent state, without any known exposure to Buddha, Bill seems unsure of your assessment. When pressed, he gives all credit to his mother. His industriousness, his sense of purpose, his integrity, compassion-all credited to his mother. The crediting of others for one's own success is itself an act of Grace. No, this is not your typical successful businessman. In a world where the first thing many do is grab the credit, whether they deserve it or not. He never succumbed to the materialistic, preening, show-off mentality that so permeates our culture. He is so far above that. Bill is truly one of those blessed people who make a constant effort to return or share the blessing. People of such enlightened bearing are as rare as streaking comets. They are remarkable. They must be acknowledged and admired.

So that's the reason we're at this party.
And if we all live to be 193-we'll never see a better reason to have a party.

Thank You all for coming.