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Good afternoon, dear family and friends.

We gather in gratitude for the life of James Edward Whitaker—Uncle Jim—born January 27, 1949, who entered into rest at the age of seventy-five. We remember him today not only because our hearts ache, but because our lives are fuller, steadier, and kinder for having walked alongside him.

I stand here as the family’s pastor, carrying reflections sent my way by nieces and nephews, by his sister Margaret, and by the many students and friends who kept finding their way back to Uncle Jim’s porch, his classroom, and his steady counsel. If you hear your own memory echoing in my words, that is fitting—Uncle Jim belonged to many, and he managed that rare grace of making each of us feel like the only one in the room.

He wore his life of service like a well-pressed uniform—without spectacle, with quiet pride.
First, to his country, as a Navy man.
Then, to generations of young people, as a high school history teacher for thirty years.
And always, to truth, to kindness, and to the faith that animated his days.

Those thirty years in the classroom did not pass like pages in a textbook. He brought the past to life so vividly that dates and names stopped being hurdles and became doorways. I am told his students still remember the way he could make a treaty feel like a fragile handshake you could almost hear, or a turning point in history sound like the hinge on our own neighborhood’s front door.

Outside the bell schedule, he coached the debate team to state titles—year after year coaxing ideas into arguments, and arguments into wisdom. He taught young minds to disagree without being disagreeable, to take a stand with facts

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and with grace, and to shake hands whether they won the round or not. If you ever watched him in those final minutes before a tournament round, you would see it—the twinkle in his eyes when a lesson landed. That spark did not dim with time; it gathered others.

He led not by volume, but by example. A principled man, a gentle mentor, a playful storyteller, a steadfast encourager. He could correct without shaming, guide without pushing, and celebrate without stealing the spotlight. If a student faltered, he did not ask, “What’s wrong with you?” He asked, “What are you carrying, and how can I help?” Many of those former students became dear friends, and they will tell you that years after the diplomas were framed, Uncle Jim was still there—with a reference letter, a coffee, a listening ear. He showed up—on time, every time.

His family knew that same steady presence. He was a devoted brother to Margaret, and an uncle not just to one set of kids, but to three generations who kept adding chairs around his table. He made the role “uncle” an art form. He planned road trips like a maestro scores music—routes that curved toward history, schedules that left room for wonder, and a trunk somehow always stocked with car-quiz prizes. You learned to keep your eyes on the passing mile markers not to count down the distance, but to be ready when he called out, “First one to name the year of the Missouri Compromise gets the next ice cream stop.” Rum raisin if you got it right; double scoop if you explained why it mattered. Those drives stitched a family together—through laughter, good-natured debates, and the kind of listening that told a child, “Your thoughts carry weight here.”

Faith for Uncle Jim was never a badge to flash; it was a compass he consulted. He found deep meaning in Scripture and service—teaching adult education classes with the same patience he showed ninth graders, volunteering at the veterans’ center with the same fidelity he had learned at sea. He visited, he called, he fixed the jammed copier and the unsteady chair; he wrote notes that arrived at precisely the right time. More than one veteran said that Uncle Jim never asked for a story he wasn’t willing to sit long enough to hear.

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His curiosity did not retire with him. He was a student to the end. Civil War history drew him the way a shoreline draws a sailor—he knew the major battles, yes, but it was the letters home, the diaries, the small mercies in bleak seasons that he loved to share. Birdwatching taught him to slow down. He could stand for five patient minutes and then point out a warbler as if introducing an honored guest. Crossword puzzles sharpened his mornings; more than a few of you have been texted a clue before breakfast with the gentle tease, “Five letters, starts with C—no Googling.” And at the library, he sat at a low table and taught kids to play chess, answering every impulsive move not with scolding but with a question: “What are you hoping will happen next?” In that simple sentence lay the heart of his teaching—hope, foresight, responsibility, and the freedom to try again.

Those who loved him will miss his wise counsel—the way he could translate confusion into the next right step. You will miss that subtle lift of his eyebrows when you reached your own conclusion, and the glimmer in his eyes when he knew you knew. You will miss his reliability, the shoes by the door at five minutes to, never five minutes after. There was nothing flashy about the way he kept his word. He simply kept it.

To speak of his goodness is to risk making him too polished, and he would not have that. He could be stubborn for the right reasons. If a student wanted the shortcut, he would hold the map a little closer and wait. If a nephew was tempted to win a chess game carelessly, he would sacrifice a bishop just to teach that careless wins seldom stay won. He liked order but loved people more. He could tell a story three times and still make it worth hearing a fourth—not because he forgot the ending, but because he delighted in the faces of those who were hearing it for the first time.

I carry a favorite memory from the family that feels, to me, like a parable of who Uncle Jim was. It is one of those summer road trips—windows cracked, a thermos of coffee, a small museum in a town that could be missed if you blinked. He led a gaggle of kids past dusty display cases until they found a

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hand-lettered placard about a local regiment. He read it aloud, put a finger on a name almost rubbed smooth, and said, “Someone kept this card straight for us.” Then he bought everyone ice cream, as promised, and on the sidewalk asked a question that landed softly: “What small thing will you keep straight for someone else?” I suspect many of you answered that question later—in your work, in your families, in the ways you show up—on time, every time.

His life invites us to do small things steadily, and to do them with joy. To seek truth with a curious mind. To mentor the next person in line. To laugh at ourselves. To be principled without being prickly. To love learning enough to share it freely.

As a man of faith, Uncle Jim trusted that service is its own kind of worship. He believed that to teach is to honor the One who first taught us; that to visit the lonely is to meet the Lord where He promised to be; that to set a child across a chessboard from possibility is to practice hope. He did not make a sermon out of these convictions. He lived them. And because he did, we can say with confidence that his race was run with purpose and that his rest is well-earned.

To Margaret, whose love for her brother has been a constant thread—may you feel the gratitude of this room woven around you. To the nieces and nephews—first, second, and now third generation—your uncle believed in you early and often. When you step into the workrooms and classrooms and kitchens of your lives, keep an extra chair open. Someone will need it, just as you once did, and you will know what to do.

To the many former students who now count themselves as friends—your presence today is a living footnote to a lesson he always taught: learning changes us most when it makes us kinder. Carry forward the habits he modeled. Argue fairly. Ask better questions. Write the thank-you note. And if there is a debate to be had, shake hands before and after.

We will close our formal remembrance here, but the celebration continues. A memory table is prepared, open for your written notes—memories from students

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and family, lines he loved, lessons he gave, stories that still make you smile. During fellowship, the family invites you to share a brief story. If ever a life deserved to be told in many voices, it is Uncle Jim’s.

Some have asked for a copy of today’s eulogy; one will be sent to cto@kuchventures.com for those who wish to keep it or pass it along.

As we go from this place, let us keep something straight for someone else. Let us meet a day on its own terms, pack an extra pencil, leave five minutes early, and look for warblers in ordinary trees. Let us choose questions that open rather than close. And, on the days that feel heavy, let us find a small museum, read a quiet name, and remember that faithfulness is often spelled in lower-case letters, day after day.

Uncle Jim, we thank you for your steady hands and twinkling eyes, for your counsel, your questions, your road maps and car quizzes, for debate trophies that gathered dust while the lessons did not, for ice cream when we got the answer right, and kindness even when we did not.

May your memory be a blessing, your example a guide, and your love an inheritance we spend generously.

Go in peace, dear friend.

We will take it from here.

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