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Good afternoon, everyone.

Thank you for being here to celebrate the life of my dad, Michael David Carter—our Mike—born on July 9, 1955, and called home at 69. I’m his middle daughter, the one who logged the miles beside him on road trips, traded big dreams with him over diner pie, and whispered late-night hopes in the quiet of our kitchen.

Today is a Celebration of Life, and that feels right for a man who always found sunsets on the horizon and reasons to believe the best was still ahead.

Dad grew up in Atlanta, where red clay got under your nails and into your soul. He used to say the earth taught him patience and faith. He believed you could listen to a piece of ground long enough to hear what it wanted to become. That faith turned into a little landscaping business that began with a push mower and a stubborn streak. Word spread, neighbors talked, and somehow, week by week, yard by yard, he built something steady and beautiful—a company with a green thumb and a heart for people.

He never saw a yard as a job. He saw it as a sanctuary in the making. He’d stand at the curb with his hands on his hips, grin just a little, and say, “Let’s make this a place where the birds sing louder.” He believed beauty changed people, even if it started with trimming hedges and hauling mulch.

But it wasn’t just the gardens. It was the way he tended people. The neighborhood kids who rode by on bikes? He waved them over, put a rake in their hands, taught them how to square a line and check their work. He told them they had a future bigger than their block, and he proved it by paying them on time and buying them lunch and showing up at their school talent shows. If they didn’t have a ride home, they rode in the back of his beat-up van, feet

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dangling over bags of soil and dreams blooming in the same space. He sponsored community gardens because he believed food grown with love tasted better—and he liked seeing the whole street show up with baskets and jokes and recipes.

He taught us that a garden is an act of faith. You put a seed in the dirt, and everything in you hopes. He found God in that quiet, steady hope. He said his prayers outside, eyes lifted to whatever sky the day offered. At dawn, at dusk, in the middle of a long hot afternoon, he'd whisper a thank you. Faith, for him, wasn't a set of rules. It was gratitude and sunlight and the courage to start again after a storm.

He did life for 42 years with my mom, Joy—his partner, his soft place to land, the love he made a life with. Together they built a home where laughter showed up unannounced and stayed for dinner. They raised three daughters—Natalie, Brooke, and me, Lauren—and eventually got promoted to Granddad, thanks to Ava and Mason, who turned him into the world's most enthusiastic human jungle gym. He called Mom his compass and us his wildflowers. And somehow that fit: we were all rooted because of them, and free because of him.

If you knew Mike, you knew warmth. You knew how his whole face smiled when he smiled. You knew that adventuring wasn't something he saved for vacations—it was a way of moving through a Tuesday. You knew his optimism wasn't naïve; it was stubborn and chosen. He was relentlessly supportive. If you told him your dream, he'd guard it like a seedling, water it with his belief, and somehow, when you weren't looking, you'd grow a little taller.

My favorite memory is a whole chapter of my life: our cross-country road trip in that beat-up van. We sang along to 70s hits until our voices gave out. We chased sunsets across the plains like they were old friends waiting for us in the next town. At midnight in small-town diners, we ate pie, and Dad would lean back and say, "This is what living tastes like." Somewhere in New Mexico, the sky got so big it swallowed our words, and all we could do was laugh. He taught me that the road doesn't have to be fancy to be holy—just honest, open, and

aimed toward wonder.

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Saturdays, you could find him at the farmers market, trading tomato tips, tasting peaches, striking up friendships with strangers he'd call by name the next weekend. He played blues guitar on the back porch, eyes closed, fingers finding truth in a twelve-bar run. He barbecued like it was an art form—slow, patient, joyful—and he was known to break into spontaneous dance moves by the grill when the first ribs came off and the playlist hit just right. I can still see the apron, the two-step, the laugh that rolled out like a welcome.

He had sayings that stuck to you. "Grow where you're planted," he'd say, when we were desperate to be anywhere but where we were. He never meant "stay small." He meant, "Root deep. Flourish here. And when it's time, transplant with courage." He also said, "Joy is something we make together." That line is especially tender now. Because he didn't mean Joy only as a feeling; he meant Joy as a person. He made a life with Joy, and together they made joy for the rest of us—at cookouts and graduations, in late-night talks and early-morning coffee, in the ways they kept choosing each other through every season.

He believed the best kind of success was measured in trust—by the lawns that became places for children to learn cartwheels, by the teens who discovered they were good at something because he let them try and fail and try again, by a community that ate from gardens he tended with steady hands. He didn't hoard knowledge. He mentored. He sponsored. He showed up. And he did it without fanfare. If you tried to thank him, he'd wave you off, hug you, and sneak an extra bag of seed into your trunk when you weren't looking.

There are the big stories and then there are the small moments that, now, feel the biggest. The bear hugs that squeezed the bad day out of you. The way he stood next to you and made you feel taller just by being there. How he could step into a room humming, and somehow the whole room remembered its own song. The belief he had in everyone's potential—how his eyes would light up when you told him your plan, and he'd say, "I can see it," like he already did.

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He was warm. He was adventurous. He was big-hearted. He was optimistic. He was relentlessly supportive. Those aren't bullet points; those are landmarks. If you're looking for him now, look for those things in each other and in yourselves.

Faith was everyday for him. He prayed under open skies. He practiced gratitude in ways that were small and real: thank you for rain, for shade, for the stubborn little plant that lived. He loved the God who keeps making things grow, even in places we thought were finished. In his last seasons, he never let go of that. He kept finding light in ordinary moments. He kept saying thanks.

To Mom—Joy—forty-two years is a rare and beautiful garden. You tended it together. You built a life that fed us. You taught us that love is daily, and daily turns out to be everything. To Natalie and Brooke—my sisters in mischief and in meaning—Dad's belief in us is not going anywhere; it's in our bones now. To Ava and Mason—Granddad's love will keep on growing in you. Every time you plant something, every time you dance by the grill, every time you help someone just because you can—he's there.

To the crew from his landscaping business, to the kids he mentored who are now grown, to the neighbors whose front yards became sanctuaries: you were part of his life's work. He was proud of you. He believed in you. Keep going. Keep tending.

I keep thinking about that van, the radio up, our voices off-key and fearless. The road long and unknown. He taught me the finish line isn't a place you rush to; it's a way you travel. Music on. Windows down. Gratitude riding shotgun. He showed me that when you aren't sure what's next, you keep your eyes on the horizon and your heart open, and you trust that the next mile will reveal itself.

We miss him. We miss his hugs, those spontaneous dance moves, the way he looked at a problem and saw a possibility. But this is a celebration, and the best way I can honor him is to notice what he planted in us and promise to keep it alive.

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So here is my promise, Dad: I will grow where I’m planted. I will find God in the ordinary and say thank you for small mercies. I will keep a seat open at the table and enough food on the grill for whoever shows up. I will stop for sunsets and eat pie at midnight sometimes. I will believe in people the way you believed in me.

For all of us, let’s make joy together, like he taught us. Let’s build sanctuaries out of whatever patch of earth we’ve been given—yards, porches, classrooms, teams, families. Let’s mentor the next kid who needs a rake and a chance. Let’s be the kind of neighbors who show up. Let’s keep the blues guitar humming on a Saturday afternoon and the farmers market hello warm and genuine.

Because the measure of a life isn’t just the years; it’s the gardens left growing after we’re gone.

Mike, Dad, thank you. For the miles and the music. For the work done in heat and hope. For the faith that could fit in a pocket and still move mountains. For loving Joy so well. For raising Natalie, Brooke, and me to be brave and kind. For kneeling in the dirt and finding God there. For being the granddad who made Ava and Mason feel like the center of the universe.

We will keep going. We will keep tending. We will keep dancing by the grill when the first ribs come off and our favorite song comes on.

And when the sky opens wide and the road is long, we’ll hear your voice, steady and smiling: Grow where you’re planted. Joy is something we make together.

We love you, Dad. Thank you for everything.

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