Gary Finney – Eulogy

I am most grateful that Sandra asked me to speak today.

Gary and I both migrated to UNT Dallas after working together at the Dallas Morning News. Gary got to UNT Dallas in 2013. I arrived in the summer of 2015.

Like anyone who had the privilege of working beside Gary, I felt his warm presence as soon as I met him at the paper in 2004. Through good times and bad during those years, Gary carried himself with dignity and grace, always drawing out the better angels from those he encountered.

Sometimes I feel there are givers in this world, and there are takers. Gary was the consummate giver.

There’s just something very special about him. Very special.

You can only imagine how happy I was when I arrived at the university knowing that Gary was there leading human resources. He was a lifeline to my past in a way that was both reassuring and entirely reliable.

I remember the first time we met in 2004. It won’t surprise any of you that he wanted to get to know me. Where are you from? How did you get to Dallas? What are you trying to accomplish? And how can I help you?

We learned that we both grew up in small towns. When he told me he was from Honey Grove, I remembered stories we had done in and around his hometown. One in particular jumped to my mind about the town of Bogata on the other side of Paris from Honey Grove.

Gary stopped me immediately. “Sorry, Bob, it’s not Bow-ga-tah, it’s Ba-go-duh.” He said it with that big smile and twinkling eyes.

I stood corrected.

Gary was the perfect HR leader for a young, growing university with a mission to provide opportunity for local urban students, most of whom were African-American and Hispanic and the first in their families to go to university.

Our mission was something he not only took seriously, he was smack in the middle of shaping its culture and traditions into an ecosystem fitting one of America’s most diverse and affordable universities.

Early on in my tenure, he assisted me in transforming our leadership team from a mostly white-led group to a mostly diverse one that better reflected who we were and what we stood for.

He also took the lead on an array of efforts to make us a better place to work. Gary realized that with a university growing as fast as we were that the budget was always chasing the growth and that our faculty and staff didn’t just carry one bucket, but more often hauled two or three.

So Gary rolled up his sleeves and opened up our strategic culture committee to anyone who wanted to make UNTD a welcoming place, an academic home where students, staff and faculty felt like they belonged.

Nothing fake or phony about him. Just genuine and caring.

Staffers flocked to work with Gary. If he believed in a mission, then it must be worth the effort to volunteer. Gary knew that people vote with their feet. If they don’t believe in something, they just walk away.

Gary put his committee’s ideas to work.

Through them, he brought the first service awards to the university where employees were rewarded for their years of service.

He was instrumental in establishing Recognition Town Halls celebrating students, faculty, staff, UNTD alumni and supportive community members for going the extra yard for our university.

We had a boisterous Town Hall in January and another good one planned for April that we had to postpone because of the pandemic. But Gary was already planning the next one in the fall.

As you can see, Gary played huge roles in helping UNTD succeed on the big stage – fostering growth, recruiting talent, developing community partnerships, all the time devoted first and foremost to our students’ success.

When word got out that I was speaking today, I was flooded with heartfelt remembrances. I wish I could read them all, but I can give you a selected few that faithfully convey how much Gary meant to us all.

So, while it is true Gary played well in that big professional arena, it was in those smaller, very personal, sometimes painful personal encounters that he touched people the most.

Angie Castillo is my invaluable assistant with a deep institutional memory of UNTD. She also is an astute judge of character.

She tells the story of going through a demanding and extended training program that Gary helped develop and lead.

What struck her was that he was a vulnerable leader who didn’t separate himself from the rest of us.

“Gary was someone,” Angie told me, “that you could always count on for good advice. His demeanor was so calm, genuine and inspiring. He spoke at my navigating leadership class about the importance of mentorship and how if it wasn’t for his mentor at TI, he wouldn’t be where he was then in his career. He will be greatly missed.”

Jim Main is our CFO. He has been around the block a time or two in his long and distinguished career, and he doesn’t mince words.

“Gary was a great listener. He was so trusting you always felt comfortable confiding in him whether work-related or personal.”

Gary helped me recruit vice president Dr. Monica Williams to UNT Dallas in 2016. He was so proud of Monica’s many accomplishments since her arrival.

In turn, Monica often turned to Gary as a sounding board.

“Gary would ask me regularly how I was adjusting moving away from my family to come help fulfil the mission and vision of UNT Dallas,” she told me.

“I would go to Gary’s office once a month and sit with him. Our conversations about personnel were short and to the point, but our conversations about family consumed the majority of our visits. I have fond memories of hearing about Sandra, the girls and the grands.”

One time, Monica asked Gary about the vintage photo in his office and he shared historical information about his family and his origins, of which he was so proud.

Shaniece Miller is president of our staff council, and she worked very closely with Gary in so many ways to make the lives of our staff better.

“Gary and I had reserved parking spots next to one another, and he and I shared so many meaningful moments and conversations walking to and from work.”

In Gary’s honor, Shaniece and the staff council would like me to announce today that their Staff Excellence Award – their highest honor – will from now on – be known as the “Gary Finney Staff Excellence Award.”

I would also like to announce today that a scholarship fund has been established in Gary’s honor. The Gary Finney Memorial Scholarship Fund. Contributions already are being received at the UNT Dallas Foundation.

All the way from Montana, Dr. Dan Edelman reached out to me after hearing of Gary’s passing. Dan is chancellor at Montana State Billings and knew Gary for more than 10 years – dating back to Dan’s time at Gary’s alma mater, Texas A&M Commerce (known as East Texas State when Gary graduated in 1979).

Dan recalled: “Gary was an enthusiastic supporter of his alma mater. He volunteered countless hours to various causes. He became a proud and dedicated ambassador to its alumni association.”

They reunited at UNT Dallas, where Dan served as CFO for several years.

“He always focused on people’s positive traits and treated everyone with kindness and compassion, regardless of their circumstance,” Dan said.

In conclusion, it is fitting to give his staff the last word.

This from Keeshala Henderson and Sherrille Shaw:

“Our lives are forever enriched personally and professionally by the daily experiences we had with Gary as our director.

“He was a confidant, a counselor, a coach and a COMEDIAN.

“Our days were filled with a commitment to excellence, but also balanced with resounding laughter.

“He mastered the art of empathy and care for others in such a remarkable form. He genuinely knew both of us.

“We were an extended family and cared deeply about Gary.

“He personified leadership and is an irreplaceable gem.

“We cling to the words he lived by: ‘leave a legacy and a footprint.’ “