

For Uncle Max

By Carl Katz

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Today we are here to honor and remember a truly unique and remarkable man, my uncle, Max Katz. However you knew him, whether as a friend, a business acquaintance, or a family relation, we all carry heavy hearts today as we contemplate our lives without him. Like all of you, I was deeply saddened to hear of Max's quick deterioration and passing. However, knowing his condition and prognosis, I am comforted that he did not suffer much or linger. Additionally, I feel so lucky to have had real quality time with him in early November, before this rapid decline, as did many of you.

Tough, crusty, cantankerous, devoted, dedicated, deeply religious, generous, caring...and warm-hearted. These are the words that come to my mind immediately when I think of Max. The unspoken but widely known truth among many of us is that beneath his outwardly tough and at times grouchy exterior that he developed into a persona only he could carry off as "amusing," lay a heart of gold. Max's generosity and philanthropic pursuits are renowned. When I think of the number of people whose lives have been made a little better and a little brighter by this one man's good and noble generosity, I am both amazed and humbled—not only because of the impact that his donations and help certainly made toward improving the recipients' lives, but also because he walked the talk; he took the Jewish concepts of Tzedakah (or charity) and Tikkun Olam (to repair the world) and implemented them year in and year out selflessly and without any desire for recognition or fanfare. In many ways, this is the greatest life lesson he has passed on to us all, and it will certainly be his legacy. Still, the one word that I think best characterizes Max and what he meant to the extended Katz family is simply—patriarch. Though he would never accept such a title or think of himself in this regard, the sincere love, respect, and *kavod* (honor) that everyone showed him is really, in hindsight, the acknowledgement of Max as the true head of our family.

My memories of my relationship with Max really start back in 1980, when at the age of 12 my parents decided to send me to Stillwater for the summer to "work" with Uncle Max on his ranch instead of attending summer camp as many of my friends back East were doing. As I often tell my wife Leah, I attended "Camp Max" for many years, as did many of my siblings and cousins here today. If I had to attach a headline to that first summer experience, it would probably be: Yankee Nephew Comes West to

Play Cowboy. Visions of riding horses on the open plains, roping cattle, mending fences, branding and doctoring steers, and various other cowboy tasks turned out to be the mere pipe dreams of a naïve kid. My unbridled excitement for my first morning out with Max was quickly dashed, as he made it clear what I was to do when we arrived at Pitts Place: “stay in the truck and out of the way and don’t get hurt.” However, I was determined to prove to him on those early visits that I could be of some real help to him, and I got my chance when we went to feed the herds in various pastures and had to confirm the number of head that were supposed to be on each parcel. Counting cattle was surely something any moron could do easily, I figured, until I saw that it wasn’t—they bunched and they moved and they looked alike and often left me wondering if I had already counted this one and that one. Usually when we got through the line Max would stop the pickup, look at me waiting for my count, which was typically one or two low or high to his count. We’d invariably ride down the other side of the herd again to double check as they fed, both counting away to ourselves until we got to the end of the line where he would stop the truck, restate his original number, and look at me with eyebrows raised and ask, “you can count can’t ya?” to which I’d reply... “yes Max, in theory, I can count.”

Maybe I was a glutton for punishment, but I persevered and kept coming back each summer. Eventually, I was promoted to official gate opener and provided a set of keys to all the locks on Max’s places. Unfortunately, trying to open rusty locks and home-made barbed wire gates quickly for him to drive the truck through so we could get on with the work at hand was a lot harder than it looked than when he did it. “Wait, wait a minute...I’ll get it.” And before I knew it, he was out of the pickup and taking the keys or the post from my hands, thus vanquishing me back to the truck, my tail squarely between my legs. However, as I got older and kept coming back and learned more about the things that needed to get done around a cattle ranch, mostly by trial and error and at risk of life and limb, I learned. I learned how to ride a horse (more or less) when one day Max told me to get on Ken Murrell’s old horse, Rony, and collect a herd and bring them into the corral at Pitts. “But Max, I don’t know how to ...” the words still hanging in the air above me, as he shot me a look and told me to get my ass in the saddle and get the cattle. And that’s how I learned how to ride a horse. Believe me, it wasn’t pretty. But eventually I learned how to move a herd from one place to another using the fence line while hanging on to the saddle for dear life. I kept coming back to Stillwater, and little by little I was given a bit more responsibility each summer. I learned how to feed cattle by honking the horn on the pickup to get the cattle to follow me; I learned the proper way to put down a square bail of hay from the back of a moving flatbed truck; I learned how to fill the cake machine on the side of the pickup from the storage silos; I even learned how to brand and doctor cattle out at Pitts Place, though the smell was something I could

never get used to. I also got an education that particular summer about making bulls into steers and being laughed at as I was handed a scalpel and told to get on with it—though I politely declined and handed the scalpel back to Mike Oiler, telling him that if I had wanted to do surgery, I'd make sure to apply to medical school.

There are too many fond memories I have of my time spent with Max to recount all of them today, but a few others that particularly stand out include the following:

- Max and I in the pickup somewhere on one of his places on a warm August morning, the engine turned off, the two of us just sitting there watching the night turn into day, as the sun rose over a hill off in the distance. The beauty of seeing the sun rise to illuminate the day filled me with a quiet calmness, and is one of my most cherished memories;
- Being allowed to drive the pickup in the pastures before I was 16 and actually had a driver's license;
- Accompanying Max on Mondays to the Tulsa stockyards, on Wednesdays to the Perkins Y, on Fridays to the sale in Hominy, and on Saturdays to Pawnee. When Max walked into a sale barn, it seemed that everyone stopped what they were doing to shake his hand and say hello. I was treated kindly by everyone with whom I came into contact because they knew I was with Max. Days at the sale barns were long, particularly for a youngster who wasn't actually buying any cattle. Max realized this and made me his official errand boy early on, sending me to the cafés to get him cups of coffee, sandwiches, or pop and to pick up his bills at the various commission desk windows or out to the vets office to get an answer on a load he just bought. I remember some Mondays in Tulsa we arrived at 9 am and didn't leave until 10:00 at night—those were very long days.
- On Fridays returning to the house after a long morning of work to a new pot of soup he left slowly simmering on the stove, a bag of fresh Shabbos rolls left for us by Anne Marie while we were out, and making sandwiches from those rolls and Max's most delicious smoked meats;
- Here's a favorite: Rolling down Highway 18 in the pickup from Pawnee drinking a Coors six-pack together at the end of our day, as Max crushed the empties in his hand and tossed them out the window to the side of the road, with me aghast as the can went flying out and trying explain to him that he just couldn't do that anymore but then realizing that this was going to be a fruitless

endeavor, so I just sat back and looked out the window, searching for the Indian chief with the tear streaming down his cheek from those 1970s anti-littering public service announcements crouched in the fetal position alongside the road wailing.

- And there was happy hour at Bobo's Mexican Cantina and 2-for-1 margaritas. To this day I remain in awe that Max could always convince the waitress to serve a baby-faced adolescent a drink simply by saying, "go ahead and bring it to him"...and they did. Who else could get away with that?
- And to that point, I'll never forget some of the best public displays of Max's famous temper and assured self-confidence, such as the time he and I were on line at the bank waiting to deposit a bunch of commission checks that had come in that morning. He waited in line rather impatiently for 15 minutes with the checks and deposit slips in hand, until boom—he had had enough; a stream of obscenities poured out of his mouth as he threw them all up in the air muttering under his breath and he walked out, with me in the background scrambling like a nitwit to catch the confetti-like storm of paper, until he yelled at me to leave it and said let's go. I thought, how can you just leave these large checks lying on the bank floor. But we did. I remember thinking...this is one tough customer! John Wayne doesn't have anything on this guy! The bank staff that knew Max for the character that he was thought nothing of this little episode, picked them all up, and ensured that the checks were deposited to his account.
- As everyone knows, Max lived quite modestly. He was often fond of saying it's just as easy to save a dollar as it is to spend one. Though at times, Max took the concept of frugality to new heights. I often dreaded the end of the meal when we went out to eat, as Max would insist on bringing home every conceivable leftover piece of food that remained on the table in a doggie bag to give to his dog, who incidentally was simply named, "Dog." I tried to explain to him on many occasions that you just can't give a dog Mexican food, or leftover fried chicken bones—"he'll choke," I'd say, to which he would reply, "ah, bullshit. Put it in the sack!" Oy. Though dining out with Max had its interesting moments as well, particularly when it came time to pay the bill. As you probably recall, Max was strictly a cash only type of guy, and he was fond of paying with \$100 dollar bills even on a \$35 tab. I think it gave him great joy to see the waitress' eyes grow large at the large denominations and scramble to try and make change.

- But there were also times when my heart truly hurt for Max, knowing that after mine or another relative's short visit that he would once again be all alone until the next time. Max's quiet loneliness is indelibly seared into my brain from our many goodbyes over the years. I will never forget that sadness I felt in my heart as long as I'm alive, shaking his worn out hand, then getting in the rental car and backing out of his gravel driveway, as his sad grey-blue eyes met mine and his bent arm waved goodbye as I started down 19th street for Tulsa.

When I think about my uncle and what he meant to me and so many others, I am overcome by a wave of emotions that range from happiness, deep respect, pride, and immense gratitude to a grave sorrow, not only from losing him but also in knowing that he did not get to experience some of life's sweeter joys that the rest of us have, like a family of one's own that you and I perhaps take for granted at times. I know there always remained a large void for him in this respect. Often a song captures a sentiment more succinctly and better than any words that I could ever write—don't worry I'm not going to break into song—but there is a song that plays in my head whenever I think of Max that I believe was written not only about him but for him, and I'd encourage all of you to find it in coming days and give it a listen. The song is Desperado by the 1970s band The Eagles. I often imagine that the founding members of that band, Don Henley and Glen Frey, were traveling cross country in the early 70s and stopped in Stillwater, OK, where they met an old cattleman and wrote those lyrics after spending a month with him.

Desperado, why don't you come to your senses?
You been out ridin' fences for so long now
Oh, you're a hard one
I know that you got your reasons
These things that are pleasin' you
Can hurt you somehow
Desperado, oh, you ain't gettin' no younger
Your pain and your hunger, they're drivin' you home
And freedom, oh freedom well, that's just some people talkin'
Your prison is walking through this world all alone
Come down from your fences, open the gate
It may be rainin', but there's a rainbow above you
You better let somebody love you, before it's too late

Max was not perfect, as none of us are, but he was a simple man that lived a simple life, guided by a strong faith, an incredibly strong work ethic, compassion in his heart, and a steady moral compass. He

was successful in his profession, admired greatly by his long-time friends and acquaintances, and deeply beloved by all of his extended family. As he often said to me on our regular Friday night and Sunday afternoon phone calls, he was doing the best that he could, and Max...you did great. I loved this kind, gentle, honorable, and generous man; he was a true mensch. Max Katz was truly a good and decent man, and all of our lives are richer for having known him...and we will miss him.