



PIANO MAN

Jenna Stewart

*Holy Family Regional School
Rochester Hills*

My grandfather's favorite song was "Piano Man" by Billy Joel. In the song, the singer shares the stories of people in a bar, capturing their dreams, struggles, and the connections found through music. My Papa, John Clair Birg, was much like the piano man—his warm, inviting personality resonated with everyone around him. Born in Michigan, he lived in many diverse places, including Mexico, Indiana, Texas, and Georgia before settling back in Michigan. Through these travels, he gained a wealth of wisdom that he generously shared with those he loved. His life was marked by his selflessness and a bountiful spirit, making him my Michigan hero.

Ever since I was young, my papa instilled in me that with determination, I could reach any goal and become anyone I aspired to be. He was not only a proud grandfather, father, and uncle, but he was a devoted husband. The love he shared with my grandmother was extraordinary—a love so profound could grace the movie screen. I recall a touching story told by one of my grandmother's dear friends. Upon returning from a trip, my grandparents reunited at the end of the airport escalator, and my grandfather whisked my grandmother into his arms. Witnessing their relationship taught me what true love looks like; a powerful example I did not have the opportunity to see in my own parents. His love for my grandmother was unconditional; he always put her and his family—his most cherished people—before himself. His selflessness inspired me to strive to be a better person, carrying forward the same spirit of generosity and love that he had every day.

The day of his funeral was a testament to the impact he had on others. On that day, over 300 people attended the mass, and over 200 gathered for the luncheon afterward. As I watched each person approach the podium to share their abundance of stories, I felt a prominent sense of loss while also an overwhelming appreciation for the man he was. The room was alive with memories of his warm smile and kind spirit that illuminated through everyone he had ever met. Laughter mixed with tears; nevertheless, each story

had a common theme: his boundless wisdom and desire to uplift others. My mother's best friend from high school recalled how after her own father passed away, my grandfather checked on her daily for months offering a lifeline during her darkest moments. The crowd murmured in agreement, each person understanding and venerating the depth of his compassion. On a Saturday at 9 o'clock (the same hour mentioned in "Piano Man"), my grandfather passed away, leaving behind a legendary legacy. Through his life, my grandfather showed me the true meaning of heroism—both in grand gestures and in quiet acts of love and devotion. With every heartbeat, I will hear my grandfather's voice, like the piano man's song, guiding me and reminding me to find beauty in every dream and connection.

