

From: Bert Kinzey <bertkinzey@verizon.net>

To: Undisclosed recipients: ;

Subject: Highly-Tighty Half-Note 2015-1027 Remembering Charlie

Date: Tue, Oct 27, 2015 12:53 pm

Highly-Tighty alumni and friends,

Before I write about Charlie, I have received a number of requests for an address to which cards of sympathy and condolences could be sent. Bobbie has asked that they be sent to her address. It is:

Bobbie Cornelison, John Cornelison, and Anne Murphy
3419 Morning Dove Road
Roanoke, Virginia 24018

John and Anne are their children.

Bert Kinzey, HT '68
President HTA

With the passing of Charlie Cornelison, we have lost the heart and soul of the Highly-Tighty alumni. Although he stepped down as president long ago, his impact and influence remained strong. As we all know, without his action as president when the HTA was founded in 1975, there would be no Highly-Tighties nor Corps of Cadets at Virginia Tech today. His service as president of the Highly-Tighty Alumni and Chairman of the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets Alumni was exemplary and the positive effect his leadership had for both groups and the organizations they support cannot be overstated. His love and dedication for the Highly-Tighties has never been exceeded by anyone.

Charlie first introduced himself to me when I, along with my classmates in the Highly-Tighty Class of 1968, arrived on campus in the fall of 1964. The introduction was something like, "Mr. Kinzey, my name is Cornelison. That is Cornelison, Sir, to you, and you'd better not forget it!" As a sophomore, Charlie was known to be very demanding, but his critiques of our uniform appearance, our efforts at practice, and our freshman knowledge was always fair and just, and we recognized that. Even as a 19-year old sophomore, Charlie had leadership abilities that stood out. He was hard but fair. You always got the idea that Charlie was truly trying to help you improve, rather than just give you a hard time. He often quoted the Highly-Tighty motto, "The eternal pursuit of perfection." He expected us to give our very best to live up to that motto. He might say that your brass looked good, but then he would add, "Good enough isn't good enough for a Highly-Tighty." Charlie knew and understood that the Highly-Tighties were far more than just a marching band. It was an organization that expected the very best from all of its members, and what better organization could you belong to?

Charlie's leadership abilities resulted in him being selected Band Company Commander his senior year. Charlie has talked to me a lot about his senior year since he and I became very close friends after I moved back to Blacksburg ten years ago. He told me of decisions he made and how he wanted to always do the right and just thing, rather than what was popular. He said it was more important to him to be respected as a leader rather than be liked. As a junior that year who remembers it well, I can assure everyone, as I did Charlie, that he was both respected and liked as our commander. At the end of his senior year, my class chose Charlie as the recipient of the Senior Service Award as the outstanding senior who had done the most in service to the Regimental Band. Today that award, which is considered to be the highest honor the Band can give to one of its members, bears his name as the Charles O. Cornelison Senior Service Award.

While I have known and interacted with Charlie over the years since we graduated, it wasn't until Lynda and I moved back to Blacksburg that we really became close friends. We had lunch together every few weeks and met on other occasions as well. Of course we always talked about the Highly-Tighties, but we came to know each other well beyond our love of the Band. Charlie was a remarkable person in so many ways. I have no other friend who I respect and admire more than Charles Cornelison.

Eight years ago, when I was asked to become president of the Highly-Tighty Alumni, Inc., the first thing I did was to have lunch with Charlie and ask him if he could give me his full support if I accepted the position. While I felt that I could offer good leadership to the organization, I knew that Charlie's support would be very important, and I also knew that neither I nor anyone else could be successful without it. Charlie unhesitatingly assured me that I would always have his complete support, and he was enthusiastic about me accepting the position. Charlie always kept his word. Not once did he ever offer me a word of advice, much less tell me what to do unless I specifically asked for it, but I certainly did ask for it often. I would have been foolish not to take advantage of his wisdom and his experience gained in his 27 years as our president.

Because Charlie and I almost always saw things the same way when it came to the goals of the organization and how to make them happen, I seldom acted against what he suggested, but on those rare occasion when I did, Charlie remained unwavering in his support. He never once criticized or questioned. Instead he remained fully supportive and positive. That was who he was. In spite of his iconic stature as our president emeritus, he let me be myself as president, offering guidance when asked rather than trying to get me to be him. Charlie remained my biggest fan, both publicly and privately, and I cannot begin to tell you how much that has meant. Since this weekend, it has sunk in to me that his support and encouragement will be missing in my last year as president, and I cannot begin to tell you what a huge loss that is. As I said earlier, Charlie was the heart and soul of the Highly-Tighty alumni. We will carry on, and we will emulate that heart and soul that he demonstrated to us, but no one will ever replace Charlie Cornelison. We will never be the same without him.

The photo I have enclosed below was taken by Cathy Fullhart just after the review on the Drillfield last Friday. It shows Charlie sitting on the wall in front of the War Memorial Chapel. He is wearing a Highly-Tighty polo shirt. At the right is Dave Spracher, the Director of Development for the Corps of Cadets with whom Charlie worked closely when he also worked in University Development. Appropriately there is a Highly-Tighty cadet in the photo, and there are two alumni. This all seems so fitting. Charlie looks good; much better than he did last year when he was dealing with some health issues. He obviously is very happy, and he is on the campus he loved. Only minutes after this photo was taken, Charlie walked up the Alumni Mall to Mike's for dinner, where he collapsed and died.

For those of you who were not at homecoming, we did several things to honor Charlie. Our alumni party, "Gunnyfest," was cancelled. We marched a missing man formation during the parade, with the commander's spot where Charlie always marched left vacant. The Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets Alumni Bagpipe and Drum Unit played "Amazing Grace" in front of the Highty-Tighty Alumni Band just outside the War Memorial Chapel. Just prior to the picnic, the Highty-Tighty Alumni Board of Directors met and voted resoundingly and unanimously to honor Charlie as a Distinguished Highty-Tighty Alumnus, and this was announced to all present. After our annual moment of silence, Echo Taps was played by two buglers, one an alumnus, and the other a cadet. During pre-game, the Highty-Tighty Alumni Guidon carried a black streamer in his honor. Also during pre-game, an announcement was made stating that the Highty-Tighties, the Highty-Tighty Alumni, the Corps of Cadets, and the Corps of Cadets Alumni mourned the passing of Charles Cornelison the previous day here in Blacksburg.

In 1980, Charlie began a "Realize the Vision" Campaign. The goal was to return the Highty-Tighties to the size they were in the 1950s and 1960s. Charlie's vision was to once again see the Highty-Tighties march on to the field in a 12 X 12 block. It took more than thirty years and the efforts of many people, but last year the Band began the year with 156 cadets. They sent me a video of them marching onto the field at Lane Stadium in that 12 X 12 block. It looked massive! They looked and sounded great as they performed their drill. I immediately e-mailed the link to Charlie in Florida with the words, "Charlie, the vision is realized." Within minutes he called me on the phone. It was an emotional conversation. While Charlie has left us far too soon, it is gratifying to know that he lived long enough to see the vision realized.

Charlie's loss is devastating. We have lost great leadership and a genuine friend. But we must celebrate and rejoice in the fact that we had Charlie when we needed him, and we will always remember him and what his life has meant to all of us.

Charlie, the vision IS realized, and it would have never happened without YOU!

