

TIM RUSSERT
1950-2008

A GOOD LIFE

BEHIND THE TV NEWSMAN'S BULLDOG FACADE WAS A MAN OF FAITH WHO LOVED HIS WIFE AND SON ABOVE ALL

The Big Guy, as his son liked to call him, had to do something he hated—leave his family. On June 12, Tim Russert wrapped up a hectic three-day vacation in Rome and prepared to say goodbye to his wife, Maureen, and their son Luke. They had seen the Pope, dined with a cardinal, swept through the Sistine Chapel, but now it was time for Russert to fly back to Washington, D.C., ahead of his family to tape *Meet the Press*, the Sunday morning show he had hosted since 1991. Just as he was leaving their room at the Portrait Suites, his wife grabbed him. “I said to him, ‘I want to give you a hug; maybe I’ll never see you again,’” says Maureen Orth, a journalist. “I don’t know why I said that to him. I just had a feeling.”

Just one day later, the Big Guy was gone. On June 13 Russert collapsed at work and died of a heart attack at the age of 58. In Washington, in his hometown of Buffalo and across the country, his death shocked friends and colleagues and folks who simply felt like they knew him. “For the people of this city,” says Bill Powers,

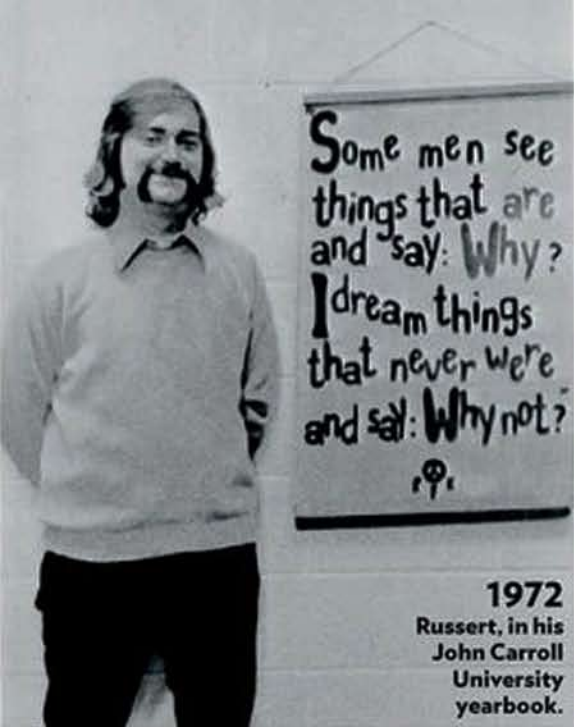
69, who met Russert at a book signing in Buffalo, “it’s like President Kennedy getting shot.” The tough-but-twinkle-eyed Russert was revered as a journalist, but he was most admired for his unmistakable common touch. “My father would rather drink a few beers with me and my buddies in the backyard than attend some A-list party,” says son Luke, 22. People were drawn to him, says his wife, “because he was so comfortable





DAVID RUSSELT/CONTACT PRESS IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

"He'd say, 'I can't believe I get paid to do this,'" his wife, Maureen, says of Russert (at work in 1992).



1972
Russert, in his
John Carroll
University
yearbook.

in his own skin. I'd always say to him, 'Why don't you buy a really nice suit?' and he'd say, 'That's not me.' Lands' End and L.L. Bean have lost a good customer."

His most lasting legacy, though, may be *Big Russ & Me*, his bestselling 2004 tribute to his working-class father, and a book that achieved something downright magical—bringing fathers and sons around the world a little closer together. "Writing this book has been more fulfilling than anything else," Russert told *PEOPLE* in 2006. "I wrote it as much for my son as for my dad." Indeed, one of the last acts of his life was a fatherly sacrifice: On the morning of the day he died, Russert took a chunk of time off from work to go to his son's new apartment in Washington and wait for the cable man. "He could have hired someone to do it, but that wasn't Tim," says *Meet the Press* executive producer Betsy Fischer. "When it came to Luke, there was no detail too small."

Russert's zeal for both work and family, and the exhausting schedule needed to balance the two, may have played a part in his death. Overweight, he had been on medication for high blood pressure and high cholesterol for 20 years, and he put in 40 minutes on a treadmill most mornings, including on June 13. "We talked a lot about health, and he was aggressive about it," says his friend and NBC news anchor

1992

"He wasn't part of the Brie-and-wine set; he was beer and hot dogs," says NBC Universal CEO and president Jeff Zucker of Russert.



Brian Williams. "But one of the hardest things to do is to avoid the 'on the road' diet. It was tough for him to try to be good." Orth, 65, says her husband was under extra stress at the time of his death. Already busy with this year's presidential election, Russert had also made the decision to put his widowed father, Tim Sr., 84, in an assisted living facility and often flew to Buffalo to see him. "That," says Orth, "was a huge psychological strain for him."

Russert managed to squeeze out three vacation days for his family's trip to Europe—a graduation present for Luke, who had graduated from Boston College—but those days were packed with events. "Plus it was very hot and humid in Rome," says Orth, who marveled at her husband's ability to shrug off fatigue. "I was so tired," she says. "I told him, 'I don't know how you do it.'"

In the days after his collapse, those who loved him did something Russert would have loved—they told stories. Raised in brawny Buffalo by his father, who worked for the sanitation department and as a truck driver in his off-hours, and by his mother, Betty, a homemaker, young Tim was "a real hustler," says his former Boy Scout leader James Kiernan. "He was working on his merit badges several at a time." He was a rising young political operative—he worked on the staffs of New York governor Mario Cuomo and Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan—when he married Orth, now a writer for *Vanity Fair*, in 1983. "They have this kinetic energy together," says Brian Williams. Orth says "we sparred a lot" but adds, "Tim was so much fun to live with. And he was always thoughtful. Every single time he went out of town he'd bring

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: COURTESY JOHN CARROLL UNIVERSITY; DAVID HUNT/CONTACT; BETSY FISCHER; COURTESY RUSSELT; KATHY SHERIDAN; JAMES KIERNAN; MICHAEL O'NEILL; BUFFALO BONES

“
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—JOURNALIST
JUDY WOODRUFF

1986

Luke “was my
greatest joy
and privilege,”
Russert said.



2005

Russert (with
son and dad)
adored Buffalo
sports teams.



RUSSERT'S HEART ATTACK: HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

Some 450,000 Americans die annually of heart attacks, and about one-third of those come on suddenly, according to the American Heart Association. “It’s always a shock when someone like [Russert] dies, but it’s not surprising,” says Dr. Daniel W. Jones, AHA president. Still, his death raises questions.

How did he die? A cholesterol deposit, called plaque, ruptured suddenly, creating a clot that obstructed blood flow. That caused a heart attack and an arrhythmia known as ventricular fibrillation. The national survival rate is only about 6 percent.

Russert passed an EKG stress test just six weeks before his death. Why didn’t the test show he was at risk for a heart attack? Some plaque is thick enough to block blood flow to the heart. But Russert’s plaque was “deposited in the wall of the coronary artery,” says his internist Dr. Michael Newman. That hidden plaque doesn’t obstruct blood flow enough to affect a stress test. And there is no way to predict when plaque will rupture.

Are there more sensitive types of stress tests? Yes. Nuclear stress tests and stress echocardiograms, which use radioactive dye or ultrasound waves and a special scanner to produce heart and artery images, can pinpoint a blockage. When coronary disease is involved, says Dr. Douglas Zipes of the Indiana University School of Medicine, “I routinely couple stress tests with imaging.” But unless the blockage is considerable, even those tests wouldn’t pick it up.

Couldn’t Russert have had a bypass or some other procedure? On blood pressure and cholesterol medication, Russert had no chest pain or distress and no abnormal stress tests. Without such indications, doctors rarely perform procedures.

What can people do to reduce their cardiac risk factors? Live a healthy life. Exercise, a good diet, quitting smoking all greatly lower the risk of having a heart attack.

—JILL SMOLOWE, WITH MOLLY LOPEZ AND NICOLE WEISENSEE EGAN



For more information, go to www.americanheart.org

TOM BROKAW: 'WE WERE LUCKY TO GET TIM'

Tim Russert went through life like a man who had won the lottery. He couldn't quite believe his good fortune—the bright, ambitious kid from working-class south Buffalo who became America's premier political journalist. He was the beefy Irish cop on the corner who knew everyone in the neighborhood. Those who tried to bluff or bully their way past him soon found themselves in a new neighborhood called oblivion.

Family and faith were the foundations of his life. His wife, the elegant Maureen Orth, a world-class magazine journalist, has the same high-octane passion for politics and Washington gossip as Tim. He called her Miss Coco. I always thought it was so fitting that they met at the 1976 Democratic convention in New York. They were married in a small ceremony in Madrid on a weekend trip to Spain in 1983. Two years later Maureen was pregnant and I'll never forget the call from Tim after they had viewed the sonogram: "I'm gonna have a son," he shouted, "a son!"

Tim had a thing about names. I'm always Tommy B on our telephone

calls. His son began life as Baby Luke and evolved into the Luke Man. They talked or text-messed a dozen times a day. They went to Super Bowls and World Series games, Bruce Springsteen concerts and Jerry Lee Lewis appearances.

And, of course, they went back to Buffalo to see Big Russ, Tim's dad, the star of his bestseller, *Big Russ & Me*, an account of a baby-boomer son and a Greatest Generation father. Big Russ worked two jobs—one as a garbage collector—to support Tim's mother and three sisters. Tim was the precocious little brother, the favorite of nuns and Jesuit priests in the Catholic schools he attended. As Tim recalled, Big Russ never said out loud, "I love you." Tim said, "He was more likely to say, 'Pick that up' or 'You're late,' but I knew he loved me."

We were lucky to get Tim at NBC News. He was my pal on the air and off. God, I'd like the number of the celestial hotline so I can dial him up on election night and hear, just one more time, "Tommy B, what's happening? This is wild!"

back the little chocolate they leave on the pillow for me."

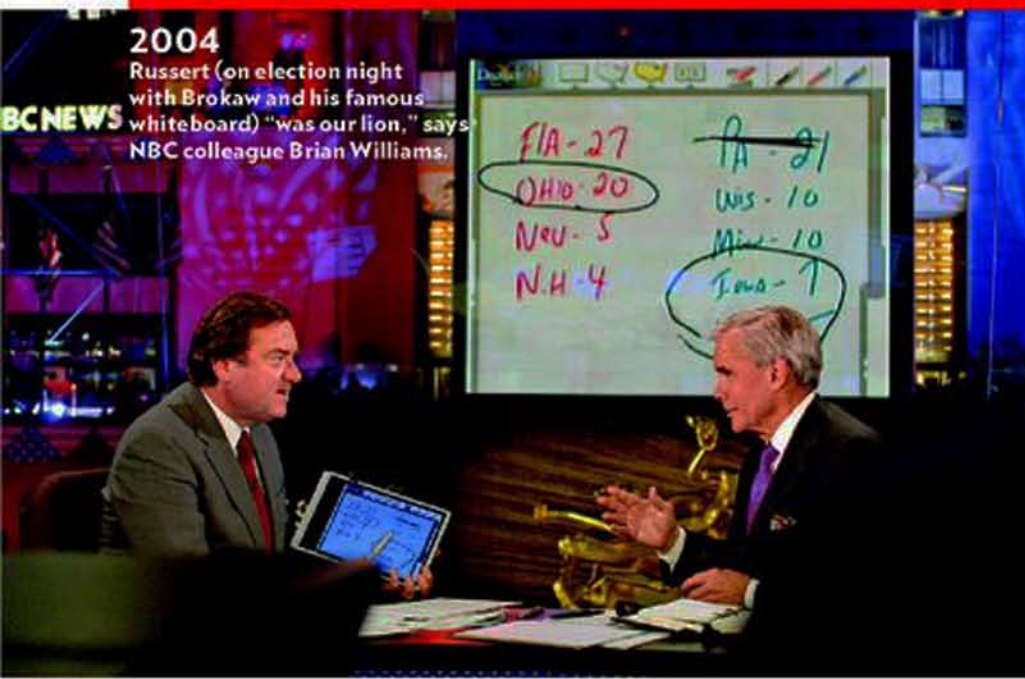
Russert's kindness extended well beyond his family. While working as NBC's Washington bureau chief he mentored correspondent David Bloom "and became like a surrogate father to him," says Bloom's wife, Melanie, who remembers a talk Russert had with her husband at the bureau after Bloom had been away from his family for a while. "Tim asked him, 'How long has it been since you've seen your kids?' After David told him, Tim said, 'Go home and hug your children.' And David did." When Bloom died after developing a deep vein thrombosis while on assignment in Iraq in 2003, Russert established an award in Bloom's honor and greeted his two young daughters with bear hugs after they spoke at the award dinner. "He said in front of everyone in his booming voice, 'Meet the Press with the Bloom Twins!'" remembers Melanie. "The girls just beamed."

Sometimes Russert's generosity was small in scale. "I brought my 6-year-old daughter Ella into work after she had lost a front tooth, and he asked her, 'What did the tooth fairy bring you?'" says Fischer. "Ella told him \$5, and Tim said, 'Well, the tooth fairy stopped by here too and left me another \$5 for you.' I don't know who was smiling harder, Ella or Tim." Other times, Russert's humanity startled even his friends. "When my son Jeffrey had brain surgery about 10 years ago, Tim bought him a hat because he knew when you have brain surgery you need a hat," says pal Al Hunt of Bloomberg News, whose son is disabled. "Tim started this hat thing for my son, and now he has about 300 hats. Tim just cared so much about Jeffrey; he was the most reliable friend there is."

In the end, however, nothing mattered more to Russert than his family. "Before Luke was born, Tim made a promise with God that if his child was born healthy, he would attend Mass every week," says someone who often spoke with Russert about his strong Catholic faith. (Russert, who studied

2004

Russert (on election night with Brokaw and his famous whiteboard) "was our lion," says NBC colleague Brian Williams.



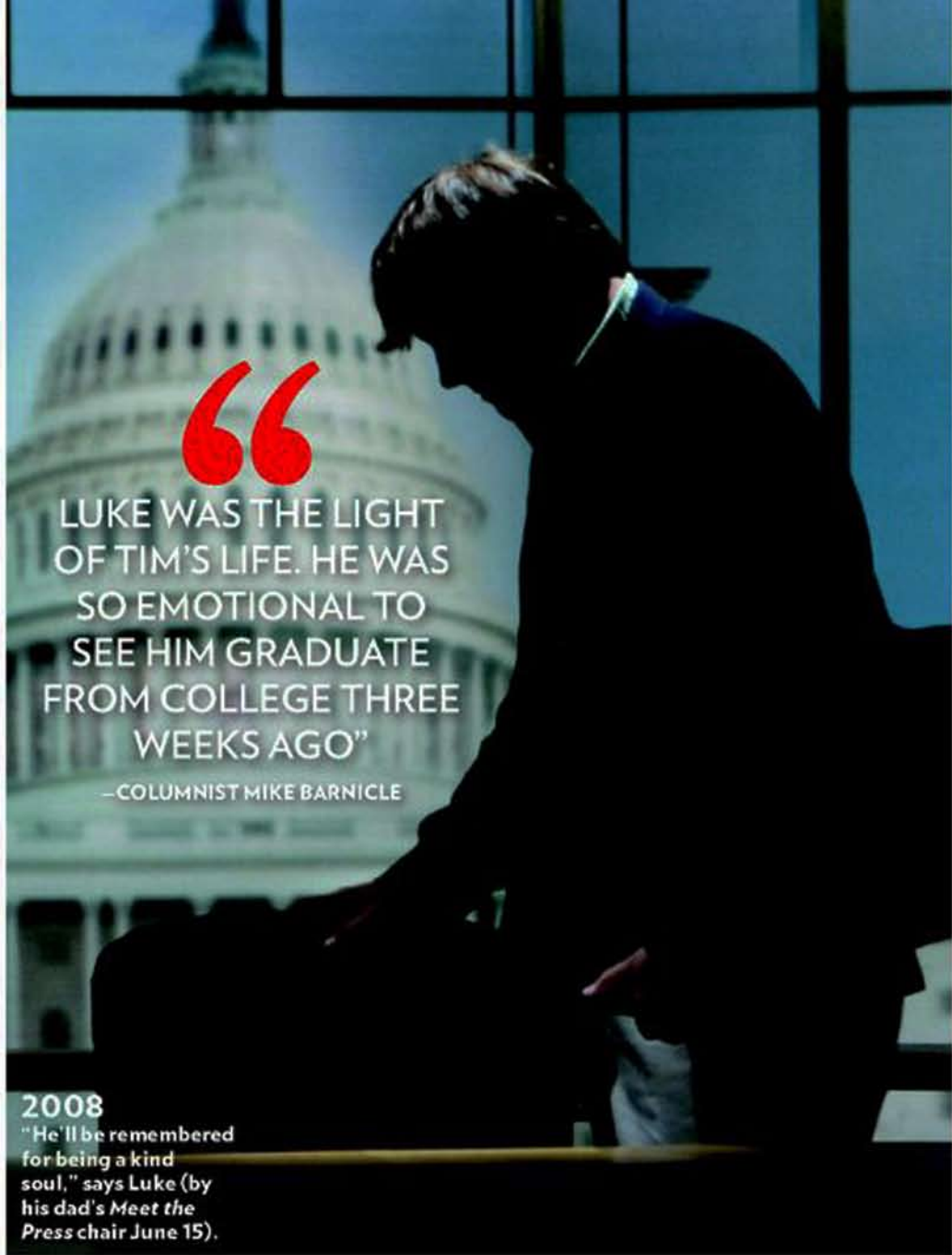


2008
Just a few days before he died, Russert visited the Vatican with his family.

under Jesuits at Ohio's John Carroll University, always carried a rosary with him.) And no matter how busy his schedule, he'd always attend Saturday's Mass at the Georgetown hospital chapel.

Russert also rarely missed any of his son's soccer or football games, attended Bruce Springsteen concerts with him and thought of him "as my wingman," as Russert once told PEOPLE. "There were no barriers between them," says Luke's friend Mike Greeley, 23. "You would go to their summer home and there was Mr. Russert, in shorts and T-shirt, grilling burgers and drinking Rolling Rocks. He and Luke were comfortable sharing anything. They showed us what you and your dad could be if you wanted to."

Ironically, Russert never shared quite that much closeness with his own father until much later in their lives, after *Big Russ & Me* came out. When Russert's mother died in 2005, "Tim's father wanted to stay in their house alone, but Tim knew his dad couldn't be left too much on his own," says Russert's friend and *Newsweek* writer Howard Fineman. "So he arranged for people to drop by the house daily and check up on his father, in such a way that it didn't appear organized. For the longest time,



“LUKE WAS THE LIGHT OF TIM'S LIFE. HE WAS SO EMOTIONAL TO SEE HIM GRADUATE FROM COLLEGE THREE WEEKS AGO”

—COLUMNIST MIKE BARNICLE

2008
“He'll be remembered for being a kind soul,” says Luke (by his dad's *Meet the Press* chair June 15).

Russ didn't know Tim had set it up.”

On June 13 Big Russ learned, just before the rest of the world, that his son would visit no more. Russert had arrived at NBC's Washington bureau at 9 a.m. to tape a spot for his talk show *The Tim Russert Show*. “He looked tired, but I figured it was jet lag,” says his guest, *Wall Street Journal* bureau chief Jerry Seib. Then Russert entered a recording booth. “Somebody said, ‘What's he doing?’” recalls Betsy Fischer, “and they looked in the booth and saw he had collapsed.”

That afternoon, one of Russert's three sisters, Kathy Russert-Hughes, and a close family friend, Michael Shea,

drove to the Buffalo facility where Russert's father lives and broke the news. “We said, ‘The Lord upstairs needed a good man to work beside him and called on Tim,’” says Shea. “His reaction was shock, just shock. He didn't cry in front of me, but his mannerisms changed. He was in disbelief.”

If anything has helped soften the blow, says Russert's wife, it's been the outpouring of sympathy for her husband. “I had no idea Tim meant so much to so many people he didn't even know,” she says. Orth is also cheered by a simple thing she knew to be true. “Tim was a happy man,” she says. “He realized all of his dreams.”