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Friends, family, neighbours,

Thank you for gathering to remember and to celebrate the life of Michael O’Connell—our Mick.

I stand here not only as a friend, but as the next-door neighbour who shared a fence line and more than twenty years of ordinary days that became, because of him, anything but ordinary.
Somewhere along the way, Mick became my mentor and, when I needed it most, a second father.

He was born on February 2, 1955, in Saint John, New Brunswick, and he left us on September 14, 2025, at the age of seventy.
A life that began on a foggy harbour and wound its way through the North Atlantic brought him at last to Halifax, where he put down deep roots.
Even when he wasn’t on the water, the sea never really left him.

Mick served twenty-two years in the Royal Canadian Navy.
He rarely dwelt on his own accomplishments; he spoke instead about the people he served with, the crews that became families, and the quiet pride of doing the job right.
He talked about teamwork as though it were a craft in itself—how a ship runs when everyone understands both their role and their neighbour’s burden.
Duty for Mick was not a word to be polished; it was a set of small, repeated acts—showing up early, finishing late, and watching out for the person beside you.
Those habits never left him.

After retiring from the Navy, he did what men like Mick do: he kept serving.
He became a high school history teacher for eighteen years, here in Halifax.

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In those classrooms, Canada’s stories rose from the page and walked around.
Vimy Ridge, the Halifax Explosion, Africville, the cod moratorium—he didn’t recite these things; he inhabited them, and invited his students to do the same.
If you were in his class, you learned dates and causes, yes—but you also learned to ask, Whose voice is missing? Whose effort made this possible? What do we owe one another?
More than once I watched a student catch him at the grocery store to say, “Mr. O’Connell, I still think about that question you asked.”
That was his mark as a teacher: not just the answer, but the habit of inquiry.

At home, Mick was a pillar of our neighbourhood and of the local heritage society.
He believed our streets held stories worth keeping, and he spent countless evenings sifting family scrapbooks at kitchen tables, helping neighbours identify a face in a photograph or a ship anchored just beyond memory.
He also had a standing date at the model shipbuilding club, where patience and exactness met a boyish grin.
If you ever saw him, hunched over a tiny capstan, sanding with the concentration of a watchmaker, you understood why his ships looked ready to sail off the mantel when the house went quiet.

He was a disciplined man—his boots were shined, his workbench tidy, his tomatoes staked straight as soldiers—and yet he met the world with a gentleness that made you exhale.
He was a born storyteller with a booming laugh that could be heard across our shared hedge.
Principled, patient, and fair—he listened before he spoke, and when he spoke, you felt steadier.

There is one winter I will never forget.
In 2015, when the snow came and kept coming, Mick worked his way down the street with a shovel and an old snowblower that coughed like a tugboat.
Driveway after driveway, walkway after walkway—no fanfare, no tab tally.
When darkness fell and the power failed, we found ourselves in his kitchen,

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warmed by a propane stove and a pot of chowder he stirred like a captain steadying a ship through a swell.
He set a lantern on the table, passed around chipped bowls, and, before long, he was leading sea shanties—half correct on the verses, absolutely authoritative on the chorus.
We sang until the lights blinked back and, for a moment, we forgot the banks of snow pressing at the windows.
That was Mick—make a way through, then make a table when you get there.

Mick loved to sail, even when it was nothing more than tracing a course across a chart spread on the dining table.
He loved woodworking, which he approached with the same slow trust in the measure twice, cut once gospel.
His tomatoes were legendary, lured along by string and conversation; more than one neighbour went home with a brown paper bag heavy and warm from the sun.
He read maritime history with a pencil in hand, leaving little notes in the margins that were half question, half wink.
In winter, he curled on weekends—he claimed it was about physics and strategy, but we all knew he also liked the after-game talk, where the stones rolled one way and the stories rolled another.

He held fast to values that made living alongside him both easier and better.
Service and duty, yes—but also respect, education, humility, and keeping one’s word.
If Mick told you he’d be there at eight, you heard the bootsteps at seven-fifty-five.
If he promised to speak up for you, he did, even when it meant standing alone in a meeting until others found their courage.
He would tell his students that a reputation is a slow-built ship—you add to it plank by plank, and you can lose it in a storm.
He built his carefully, and he sailed it well.

For all of this, Mick did not live alone in his story.

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He was predeceased by his beloved Anne, whose photograph still sits on the piano in the front room, a smile that could reroute a day.
He was the loving father of Siobhan and Patrick, and the proud grandfather of Nora and Liam.
He was brother to Kathleen and Brendan, with whom, I know, he shared decades of the kinds of jokes siblings never explain to outsiders.
In his living room, between the books and the ship models, you could feel them all—family as anchorage, the lines taut and true.

On our block, certain rituals stitched the years together.
Porch conversations at dusk—Mick in his chair with a Tim Hortons double-double cooling on the step, passing a butter tart with the seriousness of a host offering wine.
If you lingered, he would ask about your project, your parent’s health, your kid’s science fair, and he would remember your answer the next time.
He had counsel that never sounded like a verdict.
He could take the heat out of a worry just by naming what mattered and what didn’t.
And each November, he stood with us at the Remembrance Day ceremonies—cap pulled low, back straight, silence held like something sacred.
His presence there steadied the rest of us; he didn’t perform remembrance—he inhabited it.

As a neighbour, he taught me to check in and to step up without waiting for permission.
As a mentor, he taught me that leadership can be quiet, and that you can be both exacting and kind.
As a second father, he taught me to keep my promises, to return my tools better than I found them, and to apologize without a defence.
He never once used the word “legacy” in my hearing.
He didn’t need to.
It is visible in the driveway he cleared, the lesson he taught, the handshake he kept, and the grandchild he lifted onto his knee to look out at the harbour and guess which way the wind would turn.

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To Siobhan and Patrick, and to Nora and Liam—your dad and granddad loved you openly.
He spoke of you not to boast, but to take joy.
He showed that love in the same unpretentious ways he did everything else: by showing up, by asking, by building, by singing when the room needed a song.
To Kathleen and Brendan—your brother carried your shared beginnings with him, and he honoured them in the way he made a home for others.

We will miss him.
We will miss the voice rolling across the fence at suppertime.
We will miss the knock that came just when the task turned from simple to complicated.
We will miss the hat tipped low on Barrington Street in November.
But missing is not the end of the story.
What Mick believed—and what he quietly practised—was that our best tribute is to carry forward the things that last.

So we can honour Mick by keeping faith with one another.
By showing up five minutes early and leaving the place better than we found it.
By reading a little more deeply and asking the next question.
By noticing who on the street needs a hand with the shovel before they ask.
By singing a chorus, loudly and together, even if we’re unsure of the verse.

He would not want fuss, but he would want care to be practical.
In lieu of flowers, the family has asked that donations be made to our local branch of the Royal Canadian Legion.
That feels right.
The Legion is a place where stories and service meet, where care is put to work—exactly the sort of harbour Mick believed in.

Tonight, when the light thins and the air off the water turns cool, I will sit for a while on our shared fence line and listen for him in the old familiar sounds—the clink of a mug, the scrape of a chair, the echo of that booming laugh.

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I will try, in my small way, to do the next thing as he did it: patiently, fairly, with respect.
And I will raise a double-double in his honour, and maybe, just maybe, allow myself the sweet mercy of a butter tart.

Mick, you taught us that a good life is not a single heroic act, but a steady wake left by a thousand generous turns.
You taught us that duty can be warm, that history can be alive, that neighbours can be family.
We are grateful for your years—seventy well-lived—and for the way you turned a street into a community.

Fair winds, old friend.
We’ll take our bearings from the example you’ve left us, and we’ll keep watch from here.

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