

The dictionary defines a hero as “a man of distinguished courage or ability, admired for his brave deeds and noble qualities”.

In today’s society professional athletes and celebrities are often described as heroes. Given their flaws and shortcomings, most of them just don’t seem worthy. My hero was a baker and he is very worthy.

I had the privilege of being Lech’s friend and co-worker for 18 years. From our earliest days at Bread and Circus, where I was the lowly “Cookie Baker” and he was the proud Bread Baker, to our days at Au Bon Pain in the Chelsea Commissary, where we weighed each other every morning to see who was most fit (I lost), to our 10 years together at Panera where he was a key contributor in creating what we are today. Lech Loved Panera and Panera loved him.

Lech was many things. First, Lech was a Baker. Lech loved to talk bread. He could talk about it technically, culturally and discuss its historical significance. By the way, he made a great rye bread.

Lech was a Motherbread award winner. The Motherbread award is the highest honor given at Panera. It represents the best of the best of Panera. Lech won the award 4 times, including this year’s Chairman’s Choice Lifetime Achievement Award. Further, I would like to announce that Panera will instill a new award. The Zalewski Award will be given to the Panera associate who demonstrates the highest commitment to bread and passion for baking.

Lech was a proud American. I’ll never forget the day he received his American citizenship. He came into work wearing a tie of the American flag.

Just before Lech voted in his first election, we had a conversation about the sense of responsibility he felt to do his part to make America a better place. Lech was also extremely proud of his Polish heritage. He would regale Gordie and I with stories of his youth in Poland and describe how beautiful the country is.

Lech was an athlete. As you know, he was an avid biker. Lech loved to show off his latest wounds. He would limp into work in the morning and say “I wiped out in some sand going 30 miles an hour. Doesn’t this look cool?” For many reasons Janice Hovis described Lech as Panera’s version of Lance Armstrong.

Lech was a comedian. Mostly a bad comedian, but a comedian none the less. Lech could butcher a joke so badly you were laughing hysterically long before he got to the punch line.

Lech was an actor. Panera Family Reunion 2003, we are at the MGM studios and Lech gets picked from the audience to star in the “Raiders of the Lost Ark” skit in front of a few thousand people. The MC asked Lech where he worked. He said Panera. She said “I love Panera – did you bring any bread”. Lech replied “not at this time”.

Lech was stubborn. I think that’s why he had such a firm handshake.

Most importantly, Lech was a husband, father, son and brother. Lech loved his family with all his heart and was not afraid to tell you. I remember asking Lech how he found the strength to keep fighting. He told me he had to. The people he loved were counting on him. Lech was so proud of Conrad and Nicole. Whether it was Conrad’s coop at Northeastern, or Nicole as class President, you could see it in his eyes.

Lastly, Lech was the most courageous person I ever met. He had the ability to make those around him feel better when he was in so much pain. Even over our last few visits, he was the same old Lech making us laugh and cry telling stories and jokes. I left those visits feeling very comforted.

Coach Knute Rockne once said “I never lost a game, I just ran out of time”. That’s how I think about Lech and his battle with cancer. Cancer didn’t beat Lech, he just ran out of time.

In closing, I’d say we were all blessed to have Lech in our lives, even if it was for too short a time. Irena, Conrad, Nicole – I know you will be okay. You will be okay because of the love, guidance and example your Dad left as to how to approach life. We will be okay because we had a hero in our lives.