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Cancer cannot take away John Andretti's legacy

By Paul Reinhard
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As a gift for “graduating” from chemotherapy treatments at St. Luke’s Hospital in Allentown, one might receive a keychain from the oncology nurses. Inscribed on it is a reading entitled, “What Cancer Cannot Do.”

“Cancer is so limited ... it cannot cripple love ... shatter hope ... corrode faith ... eat away peace ... destroy confidence ... kill friendship ... shut out memories ... silence courage ... reduce eternal life ... quench the spirit.”

In reflecting on the life of a man whose long fight with colon cancer ended Thursday when he passed away in his North Carolina home, another line might be added to that list.

Cancer could not wipe the smile off John Andretti's face.

The ever-present and always genuine smile, his sparkling eyes and the positive personality that went along with it have been remembered this week by many people whose paths have crossed with John's over the years.

It was impossible to not like him. I never met anyone who didn't.

"My deepest condolences to the whole Andretti family," A.J. Foyt, who for years battled Mario Andretti in Indy cars, said in a statement. "This is a very sad day. I was John's godfather and it seemed the older we got, the closer we got. He called me about a week and a half ago and he sounded tired, but I didn't think it would happen this quick. When Mario called me, it really caught me off guard ... John was really a fighter and he fought this long and hard. There was no harder fighter than him. It's a terrible shame. Whenever and wherever they have his service, I'll be there."

And Mark Miles, on behalf of IndyCar and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, said in a statement: "John Andretti's skills behind the wheel of any kind of race car were admired by his millions of fans around the world, and he always returned that loyalty and kindness to become one of the most popular drivers of his generation. But John's true mission was helping others ... John's positive attitude and selflessness throughout his brave fight inspired all of us and will be a legacy that will continue forever."

I didn't know John Andretti as well as I do his uncle Mario or his cousins Michael and Jeff — or even his dad, Aldo — but we did share two common threads: Lehigh Valley roots and a Moravian College degree. I don't know how much weight he gave to that, but he was accommodating with me over the years.

But really, he was that way with everyone. That's what made his death harder to take, even for those who may have known that it was more a matter of when than if. He was a nice guy. A good guy. Or, as Mario said, "a wonderful kid ... humble ... very unselfish ... always ready to give."

The Morning Call's first coverage of John was in 1984, when he was still a Moravian student who ran off on weekends to pursue his inherited love: auto racing. He said then that he wanted to be in the Indianapolis 500 starting lineup by 1988.

"Yeah, you guys will have to send more than one guy to cover the family. And, you'll need a bigger sports section," he told colleague Ted Meixell.

Andretti was true to his word.

He qualified 27th in 1988 in what was a horrendous introduction to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway: Two blown engines in practice, a third in his first qualifying run and a second

qualification attempt ending when the turbocharger broke. He finally put the car in the field on his third try.

He told the media, “When I came in from the run, I was so upset that I had lost sight that I had qualified for the race. Then I saw my dad, and he was acting like I had put it on the pole. At that time, I wished I could trade places with him.”

Years later, when he told this writer that his rookie year at Indy was his favorite memory of the place, he said, “I probably didn’t have a complete understanding of the importance of qualifying for this race until I saw him. Then for someone like him, who deserved to be here more than me, but to not get that opportunity, that struck me even harder.”

John ran as high as eighth place in that rookie year before another engine problem put him out after only 114 laps. But he said afterward, “I wanted to beat 32 other drivers on the track [but] for the first time in my life, I got a hug from my father, so I know I did a good job.”

Maybe that was the day he felt he was really an Andretti, because so much of the family’s reputation has been established at that place.

His dad, Mario Andretti’s twin brother Aldo, who nearly died in a crash in his first year of racing, saw his own promising career end in 1969 after he crashed in a sprint car race and suffered severe facial damage. John was just 6 years old at the time.

John raced at Indy 12 times and finished in the top 10 four times. In 1991 and 1992, when he was driving for owner Jim Hall, he helped make family history — four Andrettis in the Indianapolis 500 at the same time.

A week later, John was second to Michael and ahead of third-place Mario at Milwaukee — an all-Andretti podium.

“I’m an Andretti and I’m proud of that,” he told *The Morning Call*. “The Milwaukee race is something that I’ll never forget. ... a lot of the times, you get thrown into that family grouping. I’ve worked hard and want to be respected as John Andretti.

“Unless you’re leading the race, I guess no one knows you, and we have a long way to go to be up there consistently ... I’ve run a lot of races, with different kinds of cars, and have been successful. I don’t expect anyone to know me, but if they know Jeff, they should know me.”

John raced more in NASCAR’s Cup Series than in Indy cars, winning two races for Richard Petty’s team. Perhaps the worst incident in his career came when Petty Enterprises fired him in the middle of the 2003 season. There seemed to be no point to it.

Andretti could have gotten vindictive. Instead, he took the high road. And later, he explained it to *The Morning Call*.

“People do things for whatever reasons. I never got a clear reason of what happened. I knew it wasn’t performance ... It is what it is. I’m a big boy, I have a huge amount of respect for Richard Petty and his family, and when it comes down to it, it’s all about that. Not something I look back on and have a grudge about, but not something I’ve ever been able to figure out either. That’s normal, right?”

And in 2010 and 2011, Andretti raced his final two 500s for cousin Michael’s Andretti Autosport team — with assistance from King Richard — and with third-generation driver Marco Andretti as a teammate.

Before the 2011 race — the 100th year anniversary of the Indy 500 — Marco praised John for the contributions he had made to the team in 2010, and John told *The Morning Call*, “Marco is awful kind. I hope in the end I bring more to team than just another entry ... more of an asset than a liability.

”He and I work well together. We like some of same things [in a car setup] and it would be great to get an Andretti in [Victory Lane]. He runs like his dad [Michael], and hopefully it all turns his way one of these days.”

John Andretti already has a solid legacy with his #CheckIt4Andretti campaign to stress the importance of colon cancer screening and his support of Riley Children’s Hospital in Indianapolis through his Race for Riley.

But the exclamation point on his racing life would be to have this be the year that Marco gets it done.

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