

## Pass It On®...

### He Ain't Heavy, He's my Brother.

*The tender relationship between two brothers is a beacon for us all. [A StoryCorps moment](#) that will make your day.*

Rob Rigano lives in the town he grew up in on the East Coast, in New York state. His older brother, Phil, lives in San Diego. The two are in their mid-fifties now, and they got together before COVID to record a few memories.

The ease and affection in their conversation tells you everything about their relationship.

"Robbie is what they call developmentally disabled," begins Phil. "He knew he had limits. But he had a way of just melting your heart."

Robbie was a handful growing up, but his family took it in stride. They laughed at his shenanigans and his sense of humor.

"My happiest memory is when Dad took me to learn how to swim," Robbie remembers. "But my dad is a little excitable."

Phil laughs at the inside joke the two share. "Why do you think that is, Rob?"

Robbie pauses and lights up a little. "I think that's his nature."

Phil laughs again. "Yeah? Not your nature? Maybe, you know, you doing things?"

They try to restrain their laughs, remembering Robbie flailing in the pool and his father trying to settle him down. It is the kind of story close families tell when they rib each other around dinner tables on holidays, the ones they retrieve to make them smile on hard days.

Being an older brother to a boy like Robbie could have its challenges, like having him tag along when you are trying to be cool with your friends. But Phil doesn't reveal any resentment, only delight and a lot of love for his little brother.

After all, there was a lot to learn from Robbie. After high school, Robbie got a job with the Department of Public Works, where he worked for 30 years,

picking up litter, sweeping and keeping his town clean. He came to be known as "the Real Mayor" by townsfolk. He never missed an opportunity to stop and talk with someone, sharing his quick wit and contagious smile. And he would make the rounds checking on older neighbors to make sure they were OK. As he said, "Well, who else is going to do it?"

Human nature is to be kind. To look after each other. To smile and trust and share. Somewhere on the long path to adulthood, we teach ourselves to be guarded. We lose the wonder of childhood friends and busy ourselves with tasks that distract us from the friends we could have if we just looked up.

Somehow, Robbie grew to adulthood, forgetting just about anything that troubled him or hurt his feelings. He forgave easily and forgot readily. His nature, the one that was excitable as a child, became inquisitive, clever and caring as he got older.

When COVID arrived, Robbie got it twice. It left him weakened, a tender soul drained by an unforeseen virus, and it took a toll on his sense of humor. Phil misses the Robbie he knew before the virus.

"He was always a glue that bound the family together. He is a gem of a guy, and we all helped to polish him."

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