



Honor thy parents? Not at the Williams ‘Face’ roast

By Don Summerside

Communications Committee

The roasters’ menu was a relatively mild blend of barbs and compliments for much of the Sept. 28 event saluting Bill and Evonne Williams as the 154th “Face on the Barroom Floor.”

Then came the Spice Boys. The Williams sons -- Tom, Sam and Max – turned up the heat on their parents with a salty and hilarious 1-2-3 salvo to climax the evening.

Bill and Evonne were being honored for their extraordinary accomplishments in organizing the Honor Flights that have transported more than 3,300 Nebraska veterans to the war memorials in Washington, D.C.

The four Williams sons (Ben was unable to attend because of the birth of his third child) are all veterans – two Army and two Marines. And while joining the rest of the roasters and audience in saluting the patriotism of their parents, the sons were not bashful about needling their elders.

Tom led off the brotherly barrage, addressing his father as “William Williams, a name as creative as his hair style. And he has the face of a saint -- Bernard.”

Tom added: “He wasn’t the greatest student while growing up. They say that what you don’t know won’t hurt you. That pretty much makes Dad invincible. And of course, it only makes sense that he became an educator.”

And more from Tom: “Dad has been giving blood to the Red Cross for nearly 30 years. No one has the heart to tell him that being a Republican can’t be transmitted intravenously.

“Mom has joined him with the blood donations. But she drinks so much that her blood can only be used for sterilizing the instruments.”

As was noted several times during the roast, Bill was a young teacher at Byron (Neb.) High School and Evonne was a student when the two met. Sam told his mother, “Mom, your biggest mistake was dating Bill. But I understand. You were just a child at the time. And you had to take Dad’s class to graduate.”

Son Max also hit on his father’s thick hair (“It looks like he got stuck upside down in a cotton candy machine”) and on his parents’ teacher-student relationship: “If Dad pulled that stunt nowadays, he’d be doing 30 years upstate. I just wonder what the statute of limitations is on that.”

Emcee for the roast was “Face on the Floor” No 23, N.U. Regent Hal Daub. The other roasters were Honor Flight volunteers Bob Scudder and Rick Lienemann, and KFAB morning host Gary Sadlemyer.

Scudder said he and Bill have been friends for 44 years, beginning when they were young teachers on small salaries. “Bill hasn’t always been the generous benefactor that you’re honoring tonight,” Scudder said. “I don’t want to say he was a little tight. But when he went for a prostate exam, they couldn’t get in.”

Lienemann recalled that not all of Bill’s projects were as well thought out as those of the Williamses’ Patriot Productions. “Way back when, did you know that young Bill owned ostriches and rode them at the county fair?” Lienemann asked.

“And I lost my shirt!” Bill interjected.

Sadlemyer said he first met Evonne when she was the executive director of the Nebraska Make-a-Wish Foundation. “I asked her: ‘How did you come to be with Make-a-Wish?’ And Evonne replied: ‘All those years of sleeping with Bill, it just seemed like a natural thing.’”

Artist Jim Horan said an Honor Flights illustration gave him an idea for the “Face on the Floor” caricature. The photo showed a veteran seated in a plane next to a window.

“The reflection in the window was that of a young soldier in a helmet – he looked like a soldier would appear during wartime,” Horan said. “I decided to show a line of veterans boarding an Honor Flight. Beside each vet is a ghostly figure who looks like the vet in his combat gear.”

Also shown in the Horan illustration is the Williamses’ current project – the Remembering Our Fallen Memorial, a traveling exhibit of Tribute Towers displaying the photos of more than 4,500 servicemen and women who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan and related missions since Sept. 11, 2001.

The guests of honor, saluted by emcee Daub as “this very special, very patriotic couple,” were gentle in their responses to most of their roasters, saving their sharpest retorts for their children.

Evonne said family members from six states were attending the dinner and roast and were “happy to hear the insults.”

The happy group included the Williams’ sons, Bill said, “who used to be in the will.” Bill recalled that the sons were ornery children. “We left them on the steps at Boys Town several times, but they always found their way home.

“They were the only kids in the grade school yearbook with two photos each – one straight ahead and one profile.”

Bill wrapped up his remarks by quoting the nightly signoff from the late Omaha newscaster Merrill Workhoven: “My time is up. Thank you for yours. Thank you everybody for coming.”