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Christine M. Flowers: A hero in scrubs



By Christine M. Flowers
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We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.

- Winston Churchill

JOHN Pryor would have frowned at all the attention.

Like so many truly good men, he was humble. While so many athletes and movie stars give little and claim much, he gave life with his hands and claimed nothing in return.

This was a person you encounter once or twice in a lifetime if you're lucky. Fortunately, many Philadelphians were.

And because they had the privilege of knowing him, they gathered at the cathedral this week to mourn. But, mostly, they were there to celebrate a luminous soul that burned brightly among them all too briefly.

We all know the sad, skeletal facts of a life made public on the front pages over the last few days. Pryor was the leader of the trauma team at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, where he'd worked since 1999.

He was married to Carmela, a pediatrician, and they had three young children. He was from Albany, N.Y., a Boy Scout, a Catholic, a teacher, a soldier. A healer. A man who would have laughed at the idea of being thought special, but who was clearly better than most of us will ever be.

After the Twin Towers crashed on 9/11, he rushed to New York and worked through the night at Ground Zero. He wanted to be in the thick of it, healing wounds and grieving for those he couldn't save.

He wasn't a mere observer but the most compassionate of participants. He was also angered

by the carnage in Philadelphia, having watched too many young men die "without honor, without purpose, for no country, for no one," as he wrote in a poignant essay in the *Washington Post*.

He joined the Army Reserve Medical Corps and went to Iraq in 2006, and then again on Dec. 6, to care for those who, contrary to the fallen in our own streets, did have honor, purpose and country.

He was killed by an enemy mortar on Christmas Day. He was 42.

When people die, we often say, "What a pity," or "What a shame." We cry, we shake our heads or, in those cases where death is a welcome relief because it ends a long calvary of pain, we say, "It's a blessing."

But when someone like Pryor loses his life, none of those fit. Priests can try to find some meaning in Scripture to comfort us, and loved ones can look back and try to seek solace in memories, but the loss of a person of this caliber is something that simply can't be rationalized.

SAD TO say, but the vast majority of deaths are painful for only a small circle, those who had close contact with the deceased. In other cases, such as when one of the world's bad guys draws his last breath, death can be a source of celebration.

But there's no joy anywhere in the passing of Pryor. In a world where evil abounds and bad people roam freely to prey on the innocent, he was a hope for the future. As a very wise person once wrote, hope sees the invisible, feels the intangible and achieves the impossible.

Pryor saw the invisible, the slim but real possibility that the killing in this, his adopted city, might one day end.

He felt the intangible, the pain that his brothers and sisters experienced when they were wounded on the battlefield, and made it his own. He achieved the impossible: complete and total devotion to something other than self. He was his brother's keeper, when so many of those brothers only care about the reflection in the mirror.

It's easy to canonize someone who dies under such tragic circumstances. But Pryor was the kind of guy who'd be the first to rip off the halo and say, I'm just a human, lady, stop with the melodrama.

And that's why he deserves the accolades and the front-page tributes, the endless line of mourners and the endless trail of tears.

He was an exceptional man who never acknowledged just how exceptional he was.

He was a father who loved his wife and kids, but also cared for the bleeding strangers brought to him in the emergency rooms and on the battlefield. He took himself out of himself, and reached out toward humanity.

How many of us do that, especially those who have so much to lose?

Some lives are expendable. This one was not. Philadelphia mourns you, Dr. Pryor. *

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