**Eulogy for Dr. Blake Cady**

**By Howard Koh MD MPH**

**November 5, 2023**

Once in a generation, someone extraordinary will enter your world and leave you forever changed. He will show you that you do not have to accept the status quo as acceptable. He will convince you to stand for something --so you don’t fall for anything. He will tell you that the world actually can be a better place and that sometimes the little guy can win—David can actually beat Goliath. For all of us in this room, for all of us in Massachusetts and for so many more nationwide —that person is our dear Dr Blake Cady, whose life and legacy we celebrate today.

We have already heard beautiful words about Blake’s many roles in his astonishing life-- as a loving husband to Dorothy, as a loving father to Brian, Suzanne and Paula, as a prolific clinical researcher and as a nationally renowned surgical oncologist. But I have the honor of speaking on behalf of those who will always cherish Blake as a courageous champion for public health.

I first met Blake over 3 decades ago. At the time, I was a junior faculty member at BU Medical School and newly on the Board of the Massachusetts Division of the American Cancer Society—the ACS. Blake was then the incoming President of the Division. The status quo back then for tobacco was pretty daunting. Our country and state had endured --for far too long-- the tobacco industry successfully pushing their addictive products onto countless adults and children. They seemed unbeatable and unstoppable. State politicians, distracted by other priorities, had passed little legislation to rein them in. We desperately needed new ideas and new champions to make dreams come true.

At a Board meeting of the Massachusetts ACS back then—it was mid-to late 1990 as I remember— Blake proposed that, as incoming President, his goal was to have Massachusetts become the second state ever to pass a dedicated tobacco tax through a ballot initiative. Doing so, he said, could bring in millions of new dollars to fund much needed programs for public health and tobacco education and control. California was the first state to have their citizens go to the polls to vote for a dedicated tobacco tax increase to create such funding. Why can’t Massachusetts be next, he asked?

I don’t remember much about the discussion that followed. But I do remember being absolutely stunned by the audacity of his suggestion. There were so many unanswered questions. Who would do all this work? How many people would it take? How much money needed to be raised? How would the tobacco industry respond? At the time, the ACS was a traditional behind-the-scenes advocacy group and certainly not one with any experience in political campaigns. So our initial response was to be wary of venturing into the unknown.

But not Blake. He was absolutely determined, courageous and fearless. He loved to navigate uncharted waters. In fact, I learned much later that Blake, among many other things, was an intrepid sailor. He was unafraid of tackling new horizons. And he convinced us all that it could be done ----- if only we worked together and if only we believed!

The good news was that the Massachusetts Division of the ACS was an extraordinary group of dedicated professionals, led by Executive Director, Don Gudaitis, as well as accomplished high-level colleagues like Candace Pierce and Lauren Holm—all of them are here today. The ACS also could readily marshal hundreds of extraordinary, talented volunteers who were willing to devote thousands of hours to try to make a difference. Many of them are here today as well—Dick Daynard, Jack Evjy, David Rosenthal, Ray Considine, DJ Wilson, Carol Allen, Steve Shestakofsky, Ed Sweda, Mark Gottlieb and so many more. Blake was the one who brought us all together.

Ultimately, the Board gave approval to Blake’s proposal and he and the ACS then created the Massachusetts Coalition for a Healthy Future. That Coalition ultimately included over 200 groups willing to support Q 1 – the ballot initiative to raise the tobacco tax by 25 cents a pack and devote the newly generated money for public health and tobacco control. Candace Pierce became the Campaign Director and tirelessly coordinated the effort, day in and day out. Don Gudaitis and his team continued to keep the Division running through thick and thin. The Coalition hired John Marttila, a universally respected political advisor to organize polling, media, messaging, and overall campaign strategy. And we volunteers all swung into action to attend rallies, collect signatures, fundraise, write letters to the Editor and much more.

There were so many internal Campaign meetings, dozens of them, all a blur, to review and debate every step of implementation. Blake and Candace chaired all of those meetings. And of course, there were so many external public Campaign efforts that featured media events, press conferences, and of course fiery debates with the opposing side funded completely and solely by the tobacco industry. Through all this, Blake became a recognized public figure throughout the state--on the air, in the news and the face and voice of it all.

As I watched Blake in awe, I never imagined that the Question 1 campaign would bring me and him together for the rest of our lives. Blake was already an established and universally respected senior Professor of Surgery at Harvard. I was then a much younger junior faculty member in academia trying to fathom what my future in the health might be. But despite our differences in age and stage of career, Blake and I bonded and became lifelong friends.

For me, Blake was unique. Let me cite at least 3 ways:

First of all, he was the only doctor I knew named-- Blake! That was such a cool name. In fact, when anyone in any conversation mentioned “Blake”, you didn’t even have to mention the last name. There was only one Blake.

Second, Blake was one of the first to show me that outstanding public health leaders could come from all different backgrounds and professions. After all, Blake was a rare medical professional who cared just as much about cancer prevention as he did cancer surgery. Surgeons learn to be comfortable working inside the controlled environment of the Operating Room. Blake loved that of course. But he was also comfortable working outside the OR in the unstructured and often political and chaotic world of public health. In all he did, Blake thrived and was always unafraid to be different.

Third, Blake was a literally and figuratively a giant—a towering figure who always sported that famous bowtie. That too was cool right? When Blake walked into any room, he could be confused for no one else. And when he spoke with that deep voice, everyone listened with the deepest respect as he was always direct, honest and to the point. And when he was making his point, you had to agree right? You could never say no to Blake.

More than any person I have ever met, Blake embodied ---passion. Deep, rich, all-consuming passion. Passion to right the wrongs in this world. Passion to try to do what no one else could do. Passion was his life blood flowing through every part of his being. And we sure needed that. Over the course of what turned out to be a long, exhausting 2-year campaign, with so many ups and downs, Blake served as our tenacious leader, our passionate navigator and our steadfast True North.

When Election Day arrived in the Fall of 1992, Q1 passed by a 54%-46% margin. Almost a million and a half people in Massachusetts voted at the polls to increase the tobacco tax to help fund public health. Despite being outspent by the tobacco industry by a 10:1 margin, the Coalition made history. It was David vs Goliath—and with Blake as our leader, David won! On victory night, a famous picture was taken --- we have all seen it hundreds of times since. It was of Blake and Candace, standing before many “Vote Yes on Q1” posters, their hands joined together and raised to the sky in triumph. They had tremendous smiles on their faces. Victory!

But of course, there were many more developments to come. In the aftermath of Question 1, as the newly generated tobacco tax money started flowing into state coffers, politicians started diverting those dollars away to fund budget items that had absolutely nothing to do with public health. We were all angry about that of course--but Blake was livid, especially since most people didn’t seem that outraged by all this. Blake would thunder “How can this happen? Where is the outrage”? Once I remember him literally roaring “These guys are taking our money. How can they do that? During the campaign, they never even lifted a finger!” Actually, when he uttered that last line, there was another blunt adjective just before the word “finger”. That adjective was somewhat colorful. In fact, it was somewhat profane! But we loved it—because it was vintage Blake.

Shortly afterwards, Blake called me for a conversation that would change my life. He was direct and right to the point as always. He asked me to take over from him as Chair of the Massachusetts Coalition for a Healthy Future. He said “Howard, it’s time for me to step aside and you should succeed me-- as this issue is consuming you as it has consumed me for so long”. I remember being humbled to be asked to follow someone who had become a legend. And of course, I couldn’t say no. No one ever said no to Blake.

So at Blake’s request, I took over as Chair and started running the meetings, the public events and the press conferences as he had done. I tried to model Blake’s example in everything I did. And doing so caught the attention of Governor William Weld, who then proceeded to appoint me Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Health and launched my career in public service.

With that appointment, Blake was overjoyed and so proud. He told me he had confidence in me to make a difference. That meant a lot. In fact, he hosted me, my wife Claudia who is here today, and our 3 kids for a wonderful celebration at his house, which we treasured. Subsequently, not only as Massachusetts Commissioner of Public Health but also later as US Assistant Secretary for Health in the Obama Administration, I was proud to honor his legacy by making tobacco control a major priority for the Department of Health and Human Services and for the nation. And through many conversations over the years of our friendship, I tried to thank him for all he had done for me. But I knew it was never enough.

So much has changed since then. The good news is that despite all the ongoing budget challenges, Massachusetts has long cemented its reputation as a national leader and innovator for tobacco control. So much of that was because of Q1 and Blake. The Massachusetts Coalition for a Healthy Future is now known as Tobacco Free Mass-- they established the annual Dr Blake Cady Award to honor him. I am proud of the many colleagues in the room who have chaired Tobacco Free Mass or received the Dr Blake Cady Award. Through you, his legacy lives on.

May every person who aspires to be a public health leader in the future learn from Blake’s example. His story is now captured by history for all to see, respect and cherish. His audacity. His courage. His refusal to accept the status quo as acceptable. His proven ability to show that sometimes the little guy can win.

Our eternal image of Blake will be the picture of him so beautifully captured in the invitation created by Dorothy for today’s celebration. I have it here and you have it too. Blake is sailing on his boat with a bright blue sky shining above him. The wind is blowing in his hair. Always intrepid and fearless, Blake is guiding the steering wheel with one hand while happily holding his coffee mug in the other. He has a massive, joyous smile on his face. He is sailing on to his next adventure, always courageous and never afraid.

Thank you Blake. We love you man. We are so eternally grateful that you came into our world and left us forever changed.