

## **Movers and Shakers**

The city park was quiet in the early morning. Dew clung to the grass, and the statue of the town's founder cast a long shadow toward the library he had helped build a century ago. At the base of the monument, a bronze plaque listed names of people long gone—merchants, teachers, carpenters, nurses, and farmhands. Most passersby never paused to read them. *Their eyes were on illuminated screens*, their minds already racing toward the day's appointments.

Standing there, I thought of all the unseen hands that had shaped this place. The steel skeletons of our skyscrapers, the smooth asphalt of our roads, the manicured lawns of our schools—all bore the fingerprints of men and women who had once been pillars of our community. They were the visionaries and laborers who laid the foundations, the “movers and shakers” who organized neighborhoods and volunteered at shelters, built businesses, and fought for fair wages. They were the ones who taught children to read, who carved out parks from prairies, who showed up early and stayed late not because anyone asked, but because they believed in the work.

Now, many of them live quietly on the edges of our awareness. Some sit in nursing homes or assisted-living centers, the calluses on their hands softening, their names no longer called at city council meetings. Others rest beneath earth and stone; their stories distilled into a few lines in an obituary. We hurry past their headstones, not realizing that we walk on streets they paved, drink water from wells they drilled, and enjoy freedoms they protested for.

## **Meeting the Makers**

When I first began visiting nursing homes as a chaplain, the faces behind the doors took on greater meaning for me. They were not just residents; they were the very

movers and shakers our community had relied on. In one room sat Anna B., whose family once ran the corner grocery where generations of children spent their pennies on candy. Her laugh was still bright, even if the years had made it quieter. Down the hall was Jay Wiltrout, a jack-of-all-trades who never went anywhere without a hammer, a pocketful of nails, and a story. He was the man who built our swingset and fixed our neighbors' leaky roofs; who pinched my arm and teased, "That'll feel better when it quits hurting," masking a heart that loved deeply behind a rough voice he preferred people to hear rather than vulnerably unmasking his softer, more sensitive self.

In my visits, I remembered Vito, an Italian chef whose kitchen was his pulpit. He believed a full stomach could open a soul. He made sure families were fed, ladling out pasta and sauce with a smile, always ready to sit at the table a little longer to talk and pray with anyone who needed company. He loved to tell how his life changed when he embraced his faith; he spoke of his Creator with the same passion he had for simmering Sunday gravy. An immigrant who followed his father to America, he was fiercely proud to be an American. The opportunities this country gave him—to work hard, to buy a modest house, to raise children—were privileges he never took for granted.

Beside every one of these men was a woman who held their world together. Gloria was one of them. She rose before dawn to pack lunches, shepherd children to school, and then head to work herself. She took night classes to improve her prospects, sewed and mended clothing at the kitchen table, and still found the strength to care for her husband when he was exhausted from the restaurant. Gloria and women like her rarely received applause, yet without their tireless labor and love, the dreams of their families would have faltered.

In the faces of the women, I saw echoes of those earlier generations. Some who shared stories of when they were barely out of high school, wrestling with pressure

and expectations that felt suffocating. A few carried the weight of decisions about whether to keep a baby conceived in difficult circumstances. They spoke of shame and fear, of hopes cut short. Others, despite judgment from family or community, chose to bring new life into the world and discovered a resilience they didn't know they possessed. Both paths required courage. Whether their stories ended in grief or in the laughter of a child, each was part of the unbroken chain of women who have quietly given this world its beauty and its strength.

### **Listening and Remembering**

As the weeks went on, I began carrying a small notebook in my pocket. Whenever I met someone who had lived long enough to see our city transform from dirt roads to four-lane highways, I'd ask them to tell me about the world, as it was, and the part they played in shaping it. At first, I felt shy. Who was I to ask a stranger for a piece of their life? But as word spread, people began approaching me. A retired postal worker, Kenny, recounted walking miles in winter storms to deliver medicine to homebound elders, and how neighbors used to shovel each other's steps without being asked. Maria, A former seamstress told me about sewing uniforms for high-school bands and staying up all night with a group of volunteers to finish costumes before a parade. Giovanna, the widow of a civil engineer drew me a map of our downtown from memory and pointed to a parking lot that once held a community garden where block parties were held every August.

On one of those visits, I stepped into a room where nurse Amy warned me that its occupant might not make much sense. Sitting by the window was a woman with soft white hair and clear blue eyes. "Hello, Eleanor," I said gently. She smiled and corrected me, "Oh, please call me Ellie." Unsure of how much she might remember, I asked if she would tell me a little about herself. Ellie leaned back and, to my surprise, her story came forth with striking clarity.

“Did you know,” she began, “that when I was about seventeen or eighteen, I got pregnant before I was married? The parents of the boy I loved told me that I should get rid of the baby. They said it would be better for both of us if I did. I wasn’t sure I could keep him, but I did. I named him William because I liked the nickname Billy and I hoped people would call him that. But as soon as he could talk, he made it plain he preferred William.” Ellie chuckled at the memory and shook her head. “So William he stayed.”

Life did not become easy after that decision. Ellie married a man she later discovered was an alcoholic. “He was abusive—mentally, physically, emotionally,” she said quietly. “We had three more children, and I stayed for years because I thought I was protecting them by keeping the family together. Eventually I had no choice but to leave. Divorce was not something I ever wanted, but it saved us.” After her children were grown and out of the house, Ellie’s story took a turn. “I met the love of my life,” she said, her eyes brightening. “His name is Charles. When I met him, I just knew. We married, and he still lives at home. Did you know that?” she asked, seeking affirmation. I shook my head and told her I didn’t, and she smiled as if sharing a secret.

As we talked, a tear slipped down her cheek. “I forgot to tell you about William,” she said suddenly. “He got very sick. He died when he was thirty-one.” Her voice faltered. Together we spoke about grief and how its edges soften but never disappear. Ellie admitted she still misses her son every day, even after so many years. Before I left, I asked if I might visit her again. “Please do,” she said. But as I reached the doorway her gaze seemed to cloud. Her dementia gently reclaimed her. “When you come back,” she called out, “could you bring William with you? I’d love to see him again.” I turned back, met her eyes and, understanding that she now believed her son was still alive, simply answered, “Of course. I’ll let him know you want to see him.”

Ellie's story lingered with me long after I left her room. It encapsulated the difficult choices young women have always faced, the endurance of those who stay in painful marriages for the sake of family, the possibility of love found later in life, and the aching grief of losing a child. It also illustrated how memory can be both a refuge and a cruel trickster as minds age. Including Ellie's voice in the tapestry of movers and shakers honors not only the grand gestures but also the quiet, complicated lives that shape our communities.

### **Carrying the Legacy Forward**

We cannot slow the grinding march of time, but we can decide how we move with it. Will we allow the memory of our community's makers to erode, or will we tend to it like a garden, watering it with attention and gratitude? The choice is ours, every day, as we pass the monuments and headstones, as we walk through the buildings, and wander down the streets that reflect our achievements, we become aware of the reality: someone cared about our future.

We are quick to celebrate the newest entrepreneurs and innovators, the influencers and start-ups, but there is a quiet nobility in those who built without applause. Our neighborhoods would not exist without the bricklayers who stayed after rainstorms to ensure mortar set properly, the volunteers who fought to preserve our wetlands, the janitors who kept hospitals clean through every crisis, and the mothers and fathers who worked double shifts so their children could pursue an education. They were angels disguised as ordinary people. Because of their daily acts of courage and commitment, we enjoy libraries, parks, clinics and schools that feel as if they've always been there.

Time, relentless and impartial, covers their names with the dust of new construction and the noise of constant progress. Yet if we listen carefully, we can still hear the echo of their footsteps in the halls they built. We can choose to remember them not as relics or burdens, but as the true architects of our comfort.

The next time you walk past an unremarkable bench or a street sign bearing a forgotten surname, pause for a moment. Picture the hands that poured the concrete and raised the pole. *Whisper a thank-you to the movers and shakers who once shaped our world and now dwell quietly among us or beneath us.* Our busyness does not erase their legacy; our remembrance gives it life.

Perhaps the most meaningful tribute we can offer the movers and shakers is to become, in our own ways, movers and shakers for the next generation. We can look around our neighborhoods and ask: What needs building? Who is being overlooked? Where can we contribute our time, our skills, our compassion? We can invite elders to share their memories, give them space to reclaim their role as teachers and guides. We can volunteer in the shelters they once founded and join them in carrying forward a vision of community. When we act with the same quiet determination and generosity that once defined our elders, we weave ourselves into a lineage of service and stewardship that transcends individual lifetimes.

Another day, standing in the park as the afternoon light angled across the lawn and the bronze statue glowed softly, I ran my fingers over a name I recognized. I whispered her name aloud and felt a gentle tug of connection across time. The park hummed with life, children laughing and elders shuffling slowly along the path. In that moment, the movers and shakers were not lost to history; they were woven into the rhythm of the day, their unseen hands guiding ours, urging us to build, to nurture, to remember.

As the day warmed, and the park filled with joggers and dog walkers, I sat on a bench and thought about what it means to honor those whose names are fading. Memorials and plaques are important, but they are static. The lives they commemorate were dynamic—full of struggle, laughter, mistakes and triumphs. To

truly honor the movers and shakers, we must do more than glance at their names. We must listen to the stories of those still among us and retell them to those who come after.

There is wisdom in the hands that have hammered nails and kneaded dough, in the minds that have balanced budgets and rewired electrical panels, in the hearts that have nursed sick children and organized neighborhood potlucks. When we invite the elderly to share their memories, we give them space to reclaim their role as teachers and guides. When we volunteer in the same shelters they once founded, we join them in carrying forward a vision of community. When we read old minutes of town meetings and see how fiercely they argued for clean drinking water or safe playgrounds, we understand that our civic responsibilities did not begin with us—and they will not end with us.

The younger men and women who now lace up work boots or log in from home offices stand on the shoulders of those who once swung hammers without the aid of machines or typed letters on manual typewriters long after their fingers ached. Our innovations and conveniences are possible because someone first broke ground, endured hardship, and refused to accept “good enough” when something better was needed. Remembering them, we might be inspired to approach our own tasks with greater reverence and diligence.

By speaking the names of Anna B., Jay Wiltrout, Vito the Italian chef, Gloria the tireless mother, Kenny the mailman, Ellie, William, Charles, Maria, Giovanna and the countless young women navigating adulthood, we honor the diversity of ways people serve: through cooking and carpentry, through caretaking and courier work, through the courage to bring new life into a complicated world. In doing so, we ensure that when we ourselves fade into the scenery, the seeds of our own quiet contributions will take root in the hearts of those who follow, and the cycle of gratitude and service will endure.