

EDITED Sobel tribute speech transcription-Elliot Sobel

Often at things like this, the thought goes through one's head, my head, too bad they didn't do this while the person was alive to appreciate it and I can't say that because my father was acknowledged and celebrated and honored and tributed time and time again throughout his life and his office wall is littered with plaques that we were wondering what to do with and now we have another one to wonder what to do with. One of the many tributes that he received was almost twenty years ago maybe in the Spring. It happened to be the first time that I would introduce my wife Shari to my parents and it happened to be an evening in Washington, D.C. It was a special ceremony the Life Mathematician Trust was awarding Dad with a "Lifetime Achievement Award" and it was in the form of a medallion and they called him up and presented him with this medallion and put it around his neck. Almost instantly, I don't even think he spoke. He called my mother up on stage and took the medallion off and put it around her neck and gave her credit for his entire career as the muse, the driving force, the reason for which he did everything and the person who continually encouraged him and inspired him and many of you know the story. I will backtrack just a little bit when I was about eight years old I had a toy typewriter but it worked, but the way it worked was you had to move the ball to each individual letter and then hit the button, then move the ball so I spent about an hour getting one paragraph and I made a mistake on the last line or the last word and I was so upset that I had wasted an hour of my life and it didn't turn out and I was crying and upset and my father was up in office working and he came down to see what was wrong and I told him "Dad I wasted a whole hour doing this and I wrecked it" and he told me the story of how he once spent an entire year working on his Ph.D. thesis and at the end of the year Columbia rejected it and told him to start all over. I don't know how many of you know that but his response to that news gratuitously was to quit the program and become an assembly line physical lifter at the Coca Cola bottling plant. One thing about Dad was that he was never a lifter, he was not an athletic type and he came home every day sore, complaining, muscles hurting and my mother had not bargained for this she was engaged to hopefully marry a Ph.D. in Math, not a Coca Cola bottling plant lifter of boxes, and she gave him an ultimatum "Either you go back to school and complete your degree or I quit this relationship," and it was

a no brainer and the rest is history and that is why fifty years later that she got the medallion around her neck and I am thinking that I will hang this plaque in her room at home. She remains in our home where she lived with my Dad and they would have been married seventy years in another three weeks, December 29th they would have had their seventy-wedding anniversary. He was devoted to her care-- until he fell three years ago and suffered a brain injury-- the prior thirteen years of his life he stopped everything to care for her full time at home, to keep her at home and she is still at home. This plaque will not go on his wall with the other ones. I will put it in her room opposite her bed. You guys knew Dr. Maletsky and Dr. Sobel as your college teachers. I had Dr. Maletsky for eighth grade and the unique privilege of having my own father for ninth grade Algebra and as a teenager that is good news and bad news. You cringe thinking that your father is going to embarrass you. The amazing thing is he never embarrassed me, he made me proud as I hid in the back row and pretended that I didn't know him, but I looked around and watched all the students just be entranced by him and Dr. Maletsky got the firecracker story a little bit wrong. Dad didn't light the firecracker. Dad spent that whole one class filling the board with quadratic formula and when he got to the very end and to the punch line whatever that was, I don't remember it, but I do remember this he wrote down the word "Eureka!" and at that moment he had his colleague Bill Ross would sneak into back of the room and he lite the fire cracker in a tin pail and it came from behind us and we all jumped out of our seats and for at least a number of years we didn't forget the quadratic formula but for lack of use you tend to forget these things. One thing that I remember Dad doing, this was his Math warm up for ninth graders and the difference between he and I is he did this spontaneously in his head in the moment twice as fast as I am about to do it and I am reading it because I had to prepare it, but he just made it up to get our wits about us. So, you Math heads get your heads together this is how Dad would start the class to get us on our toes. These are calculations to at least give you a heads up. $3 \times 7 + 1\sqrt{2} + 1\sqrt{2} + 1 \times 3 - 3\sqrt{3} + 3 \times 2 - 7 - 3 + 6 - 2 \times 4 + 1\sqrt{7} + 5 - 4 \times 7 + 4\sqrt{10} + 1 + 8\sqrt{5} - 3 = ("257")$ You guys are bad because in high school some of us would usually get it and he was doing this in his head quick. I will do it a little slower and give you one more shot. $3 \times 7 + 1\sqrt{2} + 1\sqrt{2} + 1 \times 3 - 3\sqrt{3} + 3 \times 2 - 7 - 3 + 6 - 2 \times 4 + 1\sqrt{7} + 5 - 4 \times 7 + 4\sqrt{10} + 1 + 8\sqrt{5} - 3 = 0$ you can check my math. So that is how

he would get us on our toes as soon as he walked into the classroom often. One of the most amazing things about his passing was we had a gathering at our house for people to come and pay their respects for the next two days and person after person that I never met before, some of you are in this room, showed up and introduced themselves by saying to me your father changed my life forever and after while it was like, really? really? included a little old lady with a walker who came in and said that she had studied with Dad in 1954, which is 62 years ago and she showed up at our house to let me know that and I wasn't all that surprised to be hearing it because the truth is every year that I have known Dad he would receive at least half dozen first snail mail letters in those days, and later it would be emails out of the blue randomly, spontaneously from students he had forty, fifty and like this lady sixty years ago who would feel motivated to suddenly write him and tell him that he had in fact changed their life forever. This was happening all the time to him so like I started he was plenty acknowledged during his lifetime. He had to know the difference he had made on all of your lives and thousands and someone told me millions of people, which is hard for me to grasp but I guess it increases expeditiously go by the students he had, the students they had and their students, it grows quickly. You know the rice on the checkerboard story? So, the other things that I realized coming here is I brought the eulogy that I delivered at the funeral. I didn't prepare much for tonight. I jotted a few things, but you can only write, and you can only deliver one eulogy for your father. Some of you were there, most of you weren't. Sorry but I can pick out a few things that I did think were relevant tonight I said I had him as my Algebra One teacher but what I didn't say was that it was a double whammy that we used his textbook The Banks Sobel Walsh Algebra One books and then it was a triple whammy because in those text books there were verbal problems like if Elliot is heading west at seventy five miles per hour and Harry, my brother, is leaving on a train heading east at 7:00 a.m. going sixty miles per hour and so forth. He would always include if you liked through those verbal problems members of our family until political correctness and rational diversity insisted that he change the Johns to Juans and the Marys to Marias in the new editions. In those days I would be called a serial monogamous, so I had a new girlfriend every two years so for every new addition of each book there was same problem but with a new girl. One year it was Karen mowing a lawn, then it was Sharon,

then it was Jan, then it was Fran and I finally met my wife late. We met when I was forty-four, twenty years ago, and it was just at the time that Dad had retired from writing text books, of which by the way he wrote over sixty and they were translated into multiple languages include Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian and Spanish that I know off hand. We have them on our shelf, so Shari didn't make the cut, he just had retired. She never made it into a problem and then it was like a miracle at that last minute one of his publishers begged him to do one final addition of one his books. So just under the wire Shari slid in and made it into a problem and as far as I can remember her train was going eighty miles per hour and heading north. I just wanted to read two little letters I got, two notes that I got after he passed, one was from a college high student which was the campus demonstration school where I had Dr. Maletsky and Dr. Sobel. This was a student from fifty years ago in 1966. He wrote me your Dad was truly one of the most important and influential people in my life whose example inspired me to pursue the career I did and become the man that I am, and I got another letter from a college friend who wrote the number of students that came to see Math as something much more than a four-letter word because of Max Sobel is legion. Max enriched Math from the inside out letting us teachers show students that it is the Math itself that is dazzling in an electronic world there is nothing like this. No flashing lights or dazzling marvels in any of Max's offerings. He showed us that the excitement came from the Math itself. As teachers and lovers of Math we knew that, but Max showed us how to impart that to others. Maybe the best epitaph for Max Sobel is what I overheard one boy telling a new student as he came to my class for the first time. This is Math, I use to try and get kicked out now it is the best part of the day. I wish they would let us stay here all-day long. So, I guess that's it. I just want to mention that Janice (Shuhan) was being a little bit shy or humble that in addition to their professional connection as student/teacher. For the last ten years of Dad's life she showed up at the house every single day for two hours or more to take him out and go for walks in the park or mall or if he couldn't go out to sit with him at the very end and feed him. She became his best friend and I think that should be mentioned. Thank you Dr. Maletsky for that wonderful reminiscence. I will treasure that. I can't wait to see it on video tape and show it to my brother or other

members of the family. Thank you, Kristie for this amazing night and all of you who spoke, Muriel and Stephanie. Thanks so much. Thank you, Dad.