

## **Eulogy for Charles Phillips**

### **Obituary**

Charles A. Phillips, 54, of Knoxville, Tennessee, formerly of Columbia, Missouri, passed away on February 15, 2020 at Parkwest Medical Center. A memorial service followed by interment was held in Columbia at Memorial Park Funeral home on Monday February 24 at 2 pm.

He is survived by his wife, Imee; sister Lisa Phillips of Columbia; brothers Christopher (Cherrie) Phillips of Phoenix, Arizona, and Michael (Susan) Phillips of Blue Springs; step-mother Sylvia Phillips of Columbia, and several nieces and nephews. He was preceded in death by his parents Alex and Alice (Fitz) Phillips of Columbia.

He was born on Aug. 29, 1965 in Columbia. He graduated from Rock Bridge High School in 1984. After graduating he worked in various food service jobs in and around Columbia including the Katy Station restaurant, Domino's pizza and Papa John's pizza. In his free time he taught himself computer programming and in 2001 decided to return to school and pursue a degree in that field. He earned an A.A.S. in Computer Information Systems from Moberly Area Community College in 2003, a B.S. in Computer Science from Columbia College in 2005, became a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Tennessee later in 2005, and earned his PhD in Computer Science from the University of Tennessee in 2015. Academic awards he earned during this time include: Outstanding Computer Science Student, Columbia College, 2004, CS Teaching Assistant of the Year, University of Tennessee, 2012, and Chancellor's Citation for Extraordinary Professional Promise, University of Tennessee, 2014. His final position was as a Postdoctoral research associate at the University of Tennessee where his research interests focused on development of algorithms and analytic techniques for high throughput genetics and genomics data plus the application of graph algorithms to problems in computational biology. He collaborated with colleagues around the world including those at the Jackson Laboratory, Tulane University, Meharry Medical College, the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Baylor University, the Berkeley National Laboratory and NASA. His expertise and humor will be sorely missed.

### **Thoughts**

Charles was a beloved husband, brother, uncle and friend. His untimely passing has left sadness in many hearts. For those who knew him, Charles' defining characteristics were his kind heartedness and most of all his sense of humor. His family tells me that you could not be with Charles long before you were both laughing together. Although this is a time of great sorrow, his loved ones can take comfort in the joy that Charles brought to them while he lived. His sister Lisa told me that when Charles was young he had a very infectious laugh. She remembers clearly a time when she and Charles were shopping with their Mother and something tickled Charles. He started laughing and everyone around them, at least 15 other people, began to laugh along with him. She remembers it as a magical moment when she realized there was something very special about Charles.

Charles showed his scientific inclinations early in life. His brother Christopher remembers two experiments that involved the families' upright freezer. Charles wondered what would happen if he unplugged it. This was not discovered for several days and his father was not pleased to discover a freezer full of soggy thawed out food. Charles' punishment for this was to remove each item one at a time and read the price tag out loud before placing it in the trash can. The second experiment involved Charles' tongue and the freezer element. His younger brother Michael is credited for telling Charles that his tongue would stick. Charles didn't believe it and decided to test it. For weeks after a small part of his tongue remained on display in the back of the freezer. The lesson Charles learned from this was that in the future it was probably a good idea to believe what Mike said.

Charles and his brother Michael were closest in age, born only 11 months apart, so when they got into trouble, they would often do it as a team. It happened that both boys had newspaper delivery routes so there were a large number of rubber bands around the house. It's unclear exactly who's idea it was, but they decided to see if they could link the rubber bands together to make a rope. Once they had succeeded in doing this, they tried to think of a good use for it. One of them - and again it is unclear which one, wondered if it might be strong enough to stop a car. To test this they strung it across the road by their house, each holding on to an end. When a car did come, they found out that rubber bands will stretch a long way but will not actually stop a vehicle. Luckily for them the driver was not angry, only amused at their experiment and did not report the incident to their parents.

As an adult, Charles developed a deep interest in computer science. After attaining his bachelor's degree, he was invited to move to Tennessee to work at the university to teach and continue his studies. He settled in and spent many happy and contented years pursuing his research interests. When he met and married his lovely wife Imee, his happiness was finally complete. Charles loved Imee very much and to make sure he would never forget their anniversary, decided to follow his brother Chris' example and got married on his birthday. Imee and Charles were very happy together in Knoxville. They had big plans for the future and perhaps the greatest tragedy of Charles' passing so soon is that they got to spend so little time together.

Charles' colleagues also feel a deep sense of loss. His friend and longtime mentor Dr. Michael Langston at the University of Tennessee shared the following "Charles was an integral part of our research team. He was our statistics expert and to be honest I'm not sure at this point how I'm going to replace him. He was universally liked by his fellow researchers and also by his students. We had our weekly telecom satellite meeting this afternoon - the first since we lost Charles. Some two dozen research scientists attended. By agenda we were supposed to talk about technical projects, papers and proposals, but Charles was the only topic anyone wanted to discuss. I've never seen anything quite like it. He had clearly touched everyone."