



George Thomas "Tom" Theriot

July 16, 1949-September 3, 2008

Eulogy prepared by Dan Gordon, Rabbinic Spiritual Leader, Temple Beth Torah, Humble, Texas

Wife:	Castine Bluestein Theriot (married Tom 8/14/71)
Daughters:	Leah Lauren
Son:	Matthew
Daughter-in-law	Emily (married Matthew)
Granddaughter	Grace
Grandson	Thomas
Mother:	Nadine
Father:	I.R. "Bob" Theriot (of blessed memory)
Brothers:	Beau and Joe (wife Mary)
Sisters:	Brenda and Diane (husband Ron)

There are many words Yiddish that are difficult to translate into English. One of them is "*mensch*." Literally, *mensch* means a man, or a person. But it has come to mean a person of strong character, someone who lives in a way we would all like to emulate. If you could look up the word *mensch* in a dictionary of the heart, you would certainly see a picture of Tom Theriot. He was a man we would all be proud to emulate.

Tom was born in the small town of Kirbyville, Texas, and grew up in the slightly bigger small town of Port Arthur. His mother, Nadine and father Bob of blessed memory, known as Maw Maw and Paw Paw, gave him a foundation of caring for others. With his brothers Beau and Joe, and sisters Diane and Brenda, Tom learned the value of family. He learned that being part of a family means caring about other people's needs before your own. He learned that the love you give comes back to you in immeasurable ways. We grieve today with Tom's brothers and sisters, and especially with his mother,

Nadine – Maw Maw – while rejoicing in the lessons of the Theriot family legacy. Tom lived for his family. The unique thing about Tom was that almost anyone he touched *became* like family.

The Bluestein family lived just two doors away from the Theriots. Tom and Castine knew each other almost as long as either could remember. Their friendship was one of respect and comfort, and it was only natural that it would grow into love. They attended the University of Texas together in Austin, and married on August 14, 1971. In January, right after graduating from U.T., Tom took a job with Humble Oil -- later known as Exxon, later known as ExxonMobil – in Kingsville, Texas, beginning a career that would last 36 years. They lived four years in Kingsville, then three years in New Orleans, where Matthew was born. Leah was also born in New Orleans, shortly before the family moved to Tyler, Texas, where the mayor was the future Emily Theriot's grandfather! Then, off to Lafayette, LA, where Lauren's birth completed the family. Shortly after Lauren's birth, they moved to Anchorage, Alaska. Castine had never lived in cold weather, and vowed she'd live in Alaska no longer than three years...they stayed just 19 months. The family moved again and again – Thousand Oaks, California, Midland, Texas, back to Thousand Oaks...before finally settling in Kingwood, where Tom could be a Texan forever, bleeding his loyal burnt orange. They marked time by the generations of dogs: Enos, Bailey, Tumbleweed...it was hard to keep them all straight. Enos, though, was especially memorable. When the family was in Alaska, Tom was concerned Enos would be cold sleeping outside. So Tom spent a whole day carpeting the dog house...which Enos ripped apart in moments. Matthew remembers his dad chasing the dog all over the backyard. While the rest of the family thawed out with a California move, a nice family was found to keep Enos in Alaska.

The house on Forest Falls in Kingwood became the family home for 20 years. This was where Matthew, Leah and Lauren grew up, and where Tom developed his professional

career and his family. He traveled all over the world with responsible positions as Exxon, most notably the Manager of Health, Safety and Environment. He went to Malaysia, Australia, Singapore...even a trip or two to Baton Rouge. In Kingwood, Matthew had his Bar Mitzvah. It was no big surprise that the son of a Jewish mother and Methodist father had his bar mitzvah in a Lutheran church. Despite Tom's family not being Jewish, all of Tom's family came to Matthew's bar mitzvah and Leah and Lauren's bat mitzvahs. They were all respectful of all religions, and though Tom sometimes jokingly referred to himself as the "goy" of the group, he believed strongly in the unity of all people as children of God.

Tom's attitude of treating all people equally is the quality that stands out the most. As Matthew put it, "it didn't matter if you were the CEO of a major corporation or a gas station attendant," Tom treated every person he met as one of God's most valued children. Both Leah and Lauren remembered their dad's motto was, "I want to take care of the people who take care of me." Barbers, gardeners, porters, skycaps, waiters and waitresses were all included in his generosity. But it wasn't just about giving a tip; Tom treated everyone with honor and respect. He learned your name, asked about your family and genuinely showed he cared. One day, the whole family was in a Shipley's Donut shop near the airport preparing for a vacation. A skycap came into the shop, and immediately said, "Hi Mr. Theriot!" Tom called him by name and they had a conversation, and the kids saw they were old pals. When Tom told him they were on their way to the airport, the skycap rushed ahead to make sure he was the one to care of them. Tom introduced Matthew to a Vietnamese attendant who worked at the Kingwood Athletic Club. This man had shared with Tom his dream of being a country western singer, and Tom bought a demo CD from him. There are dozens of stories like this. Tom was not just friendly – he made you his friend.

When they were young, the kids didn't even realize what important jobs their father had. He drove old company cars that were often clunkers. When Exxon had a "take your daughters to work day," Leah and Lauren watched their dad at work – not working. He spent his whole day making sure his daughters and everyone else's daughters were having a good time. They looked at themselves and said, "how does he make any money if he doesn't do his job?" Tom took great pains to give all the little girls a good experience. He even prepared an elaborate slide show, showing them all about oil rigs and pipelines. When he was finished, he asked if there were any questions, and seemed a little disappointed until one little girl raised her hand. He patiently asked her what she wanted to know, and she said, "The lights should be off for this, shouldn't they be?" Tom calmly smiled and said, "You're probably right."

Lauren remembered a time at school when she was about eight and they had a square dance with parents involved. Tom dressed the part as always, and Tom and Castine danced up a storm as only Tom and Castine know how to do! Then, Tom started doing a moonwalk dance in the middle of the room that was worthy of Michael Jackson! The whole room spread out to watch Tom dance, clapping along while Lauren proudly knew she had the most fun dad of all.

Everyone who worked with Tom loved him, because he appreciated everyone. His administrative assistant, Natalie, was a special favorite. Castine called her "his second wife," because sometimes he spent more time with her. He knew her children, and always had candy in his desk for Natalie's twins, Sara and Nicole. He treated Natalie like a family member, and she helped him manage his life. Even when Matthew had to change his flight this week to come home Wednesday night, Natalie made the arrangements. Matthew commented that it was only appropriate that even after Dad passed, Natalie was still managing his flight arrangements and frequent flier miles.

Tom worked hard, there was no question about it. Especially in the early years, he was often away from home. Even when he worked locally, the long days didn't leave much time or energy, and caring for the children and the household was left to Castine. Somewhere along the way, the idyllic life stopped being perfect. There wasn't a single incident, but the family began to experience some difficult emotional times. They worked together...and made it through. When the family remembered those days, and recalled how trying they were, they all acknowledged how much closer they felt later. And there seemed to be a shift in Tom. He still worked hard, but it was clear that family was much more of a priority to him. As high a level as he achieved at Exxon (and it was pretty high), some thought he could have gone even higher if he had continued to sacrifice his family. That wouldn't do, and as the years went on, the family was more and more important.

The teenage years were fun in Kingwood. Leah and Lauren were each treated to "date nights," where Tom, charmer that he was, treated them like queens. He opened doors, helped them with their coats, pulled out the chair, and told them lovingly, "never settle for anything less." Matthew got a different kind of "date night," with more – shall we say – men's adventures, especially for his 21st birthday and his bachelor party. But he'll never forget when he was 15 years old. Matthew and a friend had concert tickets, and the friend who was supposed to drive bailed out at the last minute. Matthew was really looking forward to the concert...so Tom took him. He dressed as far out as possible, with a magnet stud earring and a denim shirt tucked into some kind of funky pants. When they got to the concert, it turned out to be an all night rave. Tom patiently waited out the loud, electric music while Matthew had the time of his life.

Tom loved his music, and a variety of it. One of his favorite bands was the *A-ma-a-a-zing* Rhythm Aces, who played a song called Third Rate Romance. Tom and Castine danced to that at Matthew and Emily's wedding. At times, the kids would sneak looks

downstairs and catch their parents dancing, just because they could. He also loved the music at the temple, especially when Jeanne or Anita were singing – me, not so much. From my angle, I would watch Tom with eyes closed, taking in the music and feeling the spirit in his soul.

Tom loved any time spent with family, and made sure there were both intimate moments with one kid at a time as well as big family adventures. Tom and Matthew had father and son fishing trips. Matthew learned how to share these experiences, and was proud and delighted that Tom was able to make a final fishing trip with his nephews Greg and Travis. Not long ago, Leah, Castine and Tom drove together to Tennessee to see Matthew and Emily. Leah wasn't looking forward to the long trip, but later called it one her most memorable times. Tom sings and hums and whistles, and they made it to Graceland to be photographed with an Elvis impersonator. Other family members got to enjoy being part of the Theriot extended family world. Besides the fishing trip with Travis and Greg, Cousin Ashley enjoyed many family vacations as another sister. There were often large family gatherings in Galveston, and after Matthew and Emily's wedding thirty odd people (and perhaps one or two normal ones) spent a week together in Acapulco. Now *that was some* honeymoon!

Tom was an excellent dresser – at least to the outside world. If you saw him at work or at temple, you'd put him on your best dressed list. But his family saw the more, um, relaxed side of things. He liked to do yard work with his Exxon coveralls with the tiger patch. He even did yard work at Matthew and Emily's house in Tennessee, so incognito that the neighbors asked who the new yardman was! When the holiday of Purim came to Temple Beth Torah, you couldn't stop Tom from showing up in his bathrobe and a painted-on beard, portraying whatever character he thought wore a bathrobe and painted-on beard. And who could forget Christmastime? His red sweat pants and t-shirt with the three king salmon representing the three wise men, topped off with a Santa hat

and his self-proclaimed title as the Gift Proctor. He created an elaborate ceremony to distribute all the gifts. Everyone had to watch each gift opened individually, and nobody could take a break without the Gift Proctor declaring it break time. He had taken over the tradition from his father, Paw Paw, and made it bigger and more extravagant each year. No family event was small to Tom. He made sure that every moment was big, bold and memorable. I was honored to be part of that tradition, by participating in baby naming ceremonies for Grace and Thomas. Even as the officiant, Tom and Castine made me feel part of the family.

Tom was thrilled to welcome Emily into the family as Matthew's wife. She became another daughter to him and Castine, and another sister to Leah and Lauren. He even helped them look for an apartment in California when Matthew was going to graduate school at Berkeley. The three of them shared a small hotel room; since they weren't married yet, Emily had one bed and Tom and Matthew shared the other one. He took them on a tour of a ship tankard, and when it was finished, there had to be another ceremony. Tom gave the captain a special safety award.

After they had been married for a few years, Matthew and Emily told Tom they had "big news" to share. Tom got all excited, because he couldn't wait to become a grandfather. When Matthew and Emily, with great fanfare, announced their news was a brand new dog, they watched Tom suppress the cuss words he wanted to say. Then, they stopped joking and told him the real news; that Emily was going to have a baby. Matthew said he thought it was the happiest day of his father's life.

Grace came into the world in 2004 and quickly became her Paw Tom's favorite. They had special ice cream time, and Grace thought Tom only ate ice cream with her. Grace would hug her Paw Tom, jump on him and give him all the love he wanted. And that never stopped, even when he stuck in wheelchair or in bed. Grace never distinguished

between the healthy Paw Tom and the one who got sick. She never stopped talking to him, singing to him and loving him. For a long time, she thought he had broken legs that would get better. One very hard day, Matthew and Emily told Grace that Paw Tom was going to die. Later, Matthew heard Grace playing with her dolls. One doll said to the other, “that’s okay. He’ll be able to dance again in heaven.”

Shortly after Tom was diagnosed with cancer, Emily and Matthew had their second child, as son. They named him Thomas, and he became Paw Tom’s new treasure. When people said that Thomas was cute, Tom would say, “Doesn’t he look just like me?” The other night, I saw a picture of Tom when he was a baby, and was astounded at how much he looked like Thomas. Maw Maw couldn’t stop holding Thomas when he was a baby, as he was so much like her little baby boy, 57 years earlier. Now we can all see there is so much of Tom – his smile, his playfulness and his spirit – in little Thomas.

With all this talk of the children, Tom’s love and life partner, Castine, was always by his side. From the time they were children, they belonged to each other. They shared the difficult times, fought, bickered, and set high standards, expecting the best. And they loved and respected each other, every day, every moment. They were equals who took turns. Tom was the financial provider; Castine the household manager. They took care of each other spiritually and emotionally. Tom never liked to be dependent on anyone, which is why it was so hard for him to accept when couldn’t do the things he used to be able to do. But he did accept help from Castine – reluctantly. He grew to let himself be taken care of, knowing he had taken care of others so often.

With all these family memories, I must indulge in a few personal ones. When I first met Tom on a Friday night at Temple Beth Torah, he wanted to tell me about Kingwood Football. He said they had a daughter in the band, so when there was a home game,

they would have to miss Friday night services...but we'll be back, he said, as soon as football season is over. This non-Jewish man cared enough about the new rabbi that he didn't want me to take it personally if he wasn't in his front row seat. One day, we were chatting before services, and I casually mentioned that I found a brand of dress shirts in my hard-to-find size. I was amazed the next week to find two new shirts waiting for me on my pulpit. I loved telling people about my Methodist member who came to temple every week – whether his Jewish wife was there or not! One Friday, when a group of Methodist students was visiting the temple, we came to a time in the service when it's traditional to stand and face the entrance of the sanctuary to greet the Sabbath Bride. Just as we rose, Tom walked in the door...so instead of greeting the Sabbath Bride, we greeted: Tom Theriot! He saw a group of Methodists sitting on one side and Jews on the other...and the poor guy didn't know where to sit! He found himself an aisle seat in the middle, and we had Christians and Jews reaching across the aisle to pray together. I found out later he was there alone because Leah had been in a car accident. Both Tom and Castine had gone to the hospital, but Tom said, "If our daughter is in the hospital, one of us should be in temple praying." He was glad to be the rep. Tom and Castine were always on time for services – not a widely accepted Jewish quality. They didn't want to start late, and wanted the service to move along quickly. One night, Tom came by himself. He told me, "Dan, Castine's out of town, so don't worry about rushing this week. I got no place to go." Every week, Tom would be the first person I'd greet at the end of the service. Because of our height difference, I'd stay on the podium for a moment, so I could look him in eye. Then I'd extend my left hand, so we'd be able to shake on an even level. He always gave me a warm greeting, and always looked me in the eye. Sometimes he'd say, "that was a really good sermon, Dan." I knew he meant it, because didn't say it every week! But he loved coming to temple on Fridays and holidays. He said it was the perfect way to end his week, with prayer and with peace. He especially loved when we had children's services; almost as much as when his fellow Gentiles came for visits. The first time a Methodist group came, Tom said to me

good naturedly, “Thanks for taking care of my Methodists tonight, Dan.” I innocently asked, “are they from your church?” and he answered seriously, “this is my church. My church is where my family is.”

After he got sick, there wasn't a time when I saw him when he didn't talk about blessings. This was a man who felt blessed that he had three good limbs. He never focused on what he didn't have. Not being able to use his right arm never stopped him from anything. Right after his first surgery, he spoke about the kindness of his doctors and said, “remind me to give MD Anderson some money.” I assured him he had already given MD Anderson a bundle, but of course it wasn't enough. Just about a year ago, a dear friend from Exxon, Al Lachlin, passed away from the same kind of cancer Tom had. When I saw Tom getting chemo in the hospital the next day, the first thing he said to me was, “I feel blessed.” He felt blessed to have known Al, and blessed for the time he still had with the rest of us. During these last months, Al's wife Susie and son Clint have both provided wonderful comfort for the Theriots, knowing what they were going through. Wednesday night, Matthew and Leah and Lauren talked a little bit about feeling cheated that Dad wouldn't be there for some of the important events in their lives and in Grace and Thomas' lives. Yet we all know that Tom's attitude was to feel blessed for he had rather than lament what we can't control. The last two years have been a celebration of life. Seizing every experience, a cruise, Disneyworld, Gettysburg. Weekends in Galveston, visitors and parties. Tom chose to keep working as long as possible, wanting to complete 36 full years at ExxonMobil. When he couldn't work full days any more, they gave him a special project, in charge of an environmental business plan. It was a project he believed in and was proud of. When he retired, he did so on his own timetable. As dozens – no - hundreds, paid tribute to him at retirement parties, Tom's kids realized for the first time how beloved and revered their dad was. He was low-key and humble to them, but all the love he had given over the years was coming back. Dozens helped raise money for cancer research with Team theRiot, and Tom

enjoyed being the center of attention. As Matthew put it, “he enjoyed the fruits of a life well-lived.” Curiously enough, as a younger man, he might have been embarrassed with all the accolades. But he didn’t say, “don’t make a fuss. I don’t deserve it.” He knew he *did* deserve it. We know it, too.

The hardest thing about trying to tell Tom’s story is giving it some limits. I knew the man well, but learned so much more in the last few days. Tom’s 59 years were too short – but it would take another 59 years to tell all the stories and give them justice. So *you* tell them. I know that Castine, Matthew, Emily, Leah and Lauren won’t get tired of them. Neither will Maw Maw or Diane or Brenda or Beau or Joe. Neither will Natalie or her twin daughters. Or Tom’s barber. Or his nurse. Or the people at Exxon, the cab drivers, the skycaps, the gardeners, the art gallery workers, the Temple Beth Torah children and the people working out at the gym. And of course, Grace and Thomas *need* to keep hearing them. These stories will keep Tom alive. But what keeps him alive even more, what will ensure his legacy, is living how he taught us to live. When we treat others as equals, when we learn strangers’ names well enough so that they’re no longer strangers, when we give honest and loving compliments, we keep Tom’s spirit alive. When we embrace children of God without caring what label they call themselves or what language they speak, we strengthen his legacy. When we take a look at the hard things – even disabilities and disease – and find the hidden blessings, we show there’s part of Tom alive in us. And of course, as he always reminded us: Safety First.

Some of Tom’s final words at the end of each email included: Plan for tomorrow. Today. Nobody gets hurt. Well, today, we’re hurting. But tomorrow, you’ll still be with us, and we will continue to feel blessed because Tom Theriot has touched our lives.

-- September 5, 2008