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Brothers remember James Michael, 'strong fighter' who died of injuries from 1986 hit-and-run

Tim Hahn Erie Times-News

Published 8:00 a.m. ET Oct. 6, 2021

James Michael liked to explore the creeks and woods around his home.

He enjoyed fishing, and he loved trains.

Michael immersed himself in those interests as a boy growing up with two brothers in Harborcreek Township.

"He was always the one to climb a tree the highest, and he loved playing outside," his older brother, John Michael, said.

Those interests remained in the decades after Michael was seriously injured at age 9 in a hit-and-run traffic accident on a snowy November day in 1986 that remains unsolved.

Michael, a resident of Erie Homes for Children and Adults for 35 years following the accident, died of complications from his injuries on Sept. 8. He was 44.

Obituary: James Michael, 1977-2021

"I always think of him as the most resilient, toughest and bravest of the three of us," John Michael said of the three Michael boys.

"I definitely agree with him. Just his toughness," younger brother Stephen Michael added.

The Michael boys grew up on Station Road in Harborcreek, and were fortunate to have so many woods, creeks and waterways around their home to explore, John Michael said.

"We spent countless hours, the three of us, exploring all the creeks and woods around our house. (Jimmy) was always the one who wanted to spend the most time outside," he said.

Michael also liked swimming in the summer, building snow forts in the winter and fishing with his family on Lake Erie and Presque Isle Bay on their boat, "My Three Sons."

"We spent a ton of time on the water with my dad, fishing in the bay and lake and the lagoons. Almost every weekend in the summer," John Michael said.

Michael's interests included trains. He collected model trains, and he dreamed of becoming a railroad locomotive engineer someday, his family wrote in his obituary.

Michael had a "classic engineer's hat" that he loved, and he would set up elaborate model train displays in the basement of their home and pass out little tickets to family members

and friends to come and watch him run the trains, Stephen Michael said.

Remembered: Erie native David Bassi displayed distinctive humor in self-penned obituary

The accident

Michael was a fourth-grader at Rolling Ridge Elementary School, where he played soccer and participated in the choir and handbell choir, when the accident changed the course of his life.

It was snowy and colder than normal on the late afternoon of Nov. 13, 1986, when Michael and his brothers went outside to clear the driveway of snow.

"I think it was the first big snowstorm of that November," John Michael recalled. "It had snowed a significant amount and my brothers and I were at the end of the driveway, trying to clear the snow deposited by the snowplow by the end of the driveway so our dad when he came home could drive into the driveway."

At some point, a passing car struck Michael.

The car was headed east on Route 430, Station Road, when it hit Michael. Police said the driver did not stop, according to a report in the Erie Morning News.

Police described the car as an older-model, light brown, two-door car with a white license plate, according to the Morning News report. A later report in the Erie Daily Times described the car's driver as a white male.

John Michael said his family never understood what really happened. He recalled at the time that the theories were the driver was either drunk and was riding the roadway's berm, where Michael was reportedly standing, to follow the contour of the road, or the driver was "riding the berm way too far over to get traction."

John Michael said he also recalled that the Pennsylvania State Police and medical personnel said his brother's injuries were so severe that the driver must have known the car hit someone, and that there must have been significant damage to the car.

"The other odd thing was Jimmy was wearing a brand-new snowsuit and the material was so slippery and sleek it didn't pick up any kind of paint or marking or identification to lead authorities to pinpoint what type of car it was," he said. "They said normally in a hit-and-run you can get paint samples off a person's clothing and kind of track the make and model."

Investigators also searched the area but never found a piece of chrome, a mirror or anything else that might have fallen off the car as a result of the accident, John Michael said.

State police never located the car or identified the driver in the crash.

Remembered: Erie veteran remembered as loving son. His mother hopes to raise suicide awareness

Loving care

Michael had suffered brain, head and internal injuries in the crash and was taken to what was then called Hamot Hospital, where he was listed in critical condition, according to news reports. He was in the hospital for months, his brothers said.

Stephen Michael said his brother first entered Erie Homes for Children and Adults when it was called Erie Infants and Youth Home.

"He went there as a younger child and sort of grew up with Erie Homes as they grew and evolved," he said.

The agency, which provides homes and programming to those with intellectual and physical disabilities, was founded in 1912 and has grown to 20 community homes and a variety of community-based programs, according to information on the agency's website. Michael moved into one of those homes, where "he got to live in a very residential setting in more of a traditional home," Stephen Michael said.

"I always thought that was a very unique program," he said.

Michael moved into a group home on East 38th Street in Erie in 1993 and lived there until he died, said Kara Carone, vice president of residential services and therapies for Erie Homes for Children and Adults. Carone said she started at the home as a supervisor when she was hired by the agency in 1994.

She said Michael was one of those residents others became attached to pretty quickly.

"He was pretty calm, just a laid-back kind of guy. That attracted a lot of people," Carone said.

"The level of care he needed was pretty high," she said. "When you do those sort of interactions with people, it's a very nurturing sort of job. People just loved him, loved taking care of him, just loved being around him."

Michael loved the Cleveland Browns and hunting, Carone said. He enjoyed watching football on Sundays, and he had the opportunity to accompany one of the agency's direct support professionals on a hunting trip, she said.

"Jimmy loved every minute of it," she said.

They never forgot about Jimmy

Michael was also enrolled in education programs and enrichment activities at the Barber National Institute.

John Michael said his family was fortunate that within Erie they had the resources of the Erie Homes for Children and Adults and the Barber Center to provide the kind of care and programming that his brother received.

"Both the Barber Center and Erie Homes were very in-tune to the various interests and hobbies that Jimmy had growing up," he said, noting that the agencies "did everything" with his brother, from school work to baseball games to fishing trips.

Remembered: A mother of 5, a refugee and a business owner, Mai Tran made a life in Erie Michael's classmates at Rolling Ridge Elementary School never forgot about him.

Even as they grew up, his classmates always kept in touch with him through visits, cards and letters, John Michael said.

They also graduated together, with Michael receiving an honorary diploma from Harbor Creek High School in 1995.

"It was very important and touching that he got to graduate with that class," he said.

Stephen Michael said he was fortunate to have two older brothers as he grew up. He said John was more intelligent, while he was more athletic.

Jimmy was a mix between the two, he said.

"Jimmy had it all. He was very well-rounded," Stephen Michael said.

John Michael said he wants his brother to be remembered as a strong fighter to the end.

"And he was a most loving brother, son and friend," he said.

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