

RALPH GABRIEL RASKAS



Ralph G. Raskas

In 2008, Ralph and I left for North Dakota. I had made it to 49 states and Ralph wanted to be my partner on the 50th state trip. We ended our journey in Jackson Hole, Wyoming planning to stay at a ski resort during the summer cheaper months. When we arrived, it was apparent that the construction was prohibitive so they sent us to a unique hotel up the hill. As we arrived there was a plethora of tall natural grass and staff in white robes. Ralph looked at me at the age of 12 and said, "looks like we are going to have a romantic weekend." We checked into our room and the view from the patio looked like this...the Snake River and the Grand Tetons.



Grand Tetons With Ralph August 2008

Later that evening, we sat outside watched the sun set and decided to return to the hot tub, after dark, made of earth color flagstone. We looked at the Grand Teton Mountain range and the sporadic heat silhouette beyond the range and then up to the moonless sky with more star and galaxy that we had ever seen. We silently and verbally acknowledged that this was possibly going to be the most peaceful moment of our existence and decided to use the code word "AMANGANI" as the way for us to travel back to this moment and moments. This was the name of the hotel. As the years passed we often exchanged the word during the stressful and quiet times by the fire pit outside, in text and conversation in the hospital. A few weeks ago, I called the hotel and asked the front manager the definition of the hotel name. He sent me the following email:

From: Chandler Minton <cminton@aman.com>
Date: April 4, 2017 at 8:27:02 PM CDT
To: jeraskas@gmail.com
Cc: Stuart Lang <slang@aman.com>
Subject: AMANGANI translation

Dear Mr. Raskas,

Warm greetings and thank you for your call. Following up on our conversation..

AMANGANI is a conjunctive name created by two languages. "Aman" is sanskrit for the word "peaceful" and is the first part of every resort's name in the company. The second part of the word comes from a local language to create a name that depicts something special about the property. In our case, "gani" is from the Shoshone Nation and means "home". It is our goal to make every guest feel as if they are staying in the home of a good friend or even their own. With this in mind, AMANGANI was created to mean "Peaceful Home".

You and your son joined the Amangani Family when you stayed from August 8th to August 10th, 2008 in the Superior Suite number 30. The room was located in the South Wing on the middle floor overlooking the South Lawn, Snake River Valley, the Teton Mountain Range, and Snake River Mountain Range.

It always was and always will be a pleasure to have you in our "Peaceful Home". On behalf of the entire Amangani Family, wishing you all the best.

Sincerely,

--

Chandler Minton
Evening Hotel Manager

AMANGANI
PO Box 15030
1535 N. East Butte Road
Jackson, Wyoming USA

We received a backpack upon check. This was our code word. With all the suffering and pain in 2016 that had gripped your being, Ralph you must now be in your AMANGANI; inscribed on both ends of the granite bench in the font found on the backpack.

The only differences between you and I right now is that:

I am breathing and standing.

Although, standing on my final resting place while searching for my AMANGANI until the energy of us meets again.

Last Sunday as the sun rose in the cemetery, I stained the wood used for this box. I had a full cup of coffee that mysteriously fell and rolled off the car hood as I finished painting the boards.

There was no wind or motion in the car. I decided to walk up the hill to look at my grand parents monument. My grandfather's name was Ralph. He passed away a few months before you were born. I noticed in Hebrew the phrase - "the world is built on kindness." Your great grandfather was kind just like you. I selected the word kind on your monument without that knowledge. You were truly always kind. It was your trademark. It was your being. You gave of yourself generously in time, money, ear and hand even when you were not well.

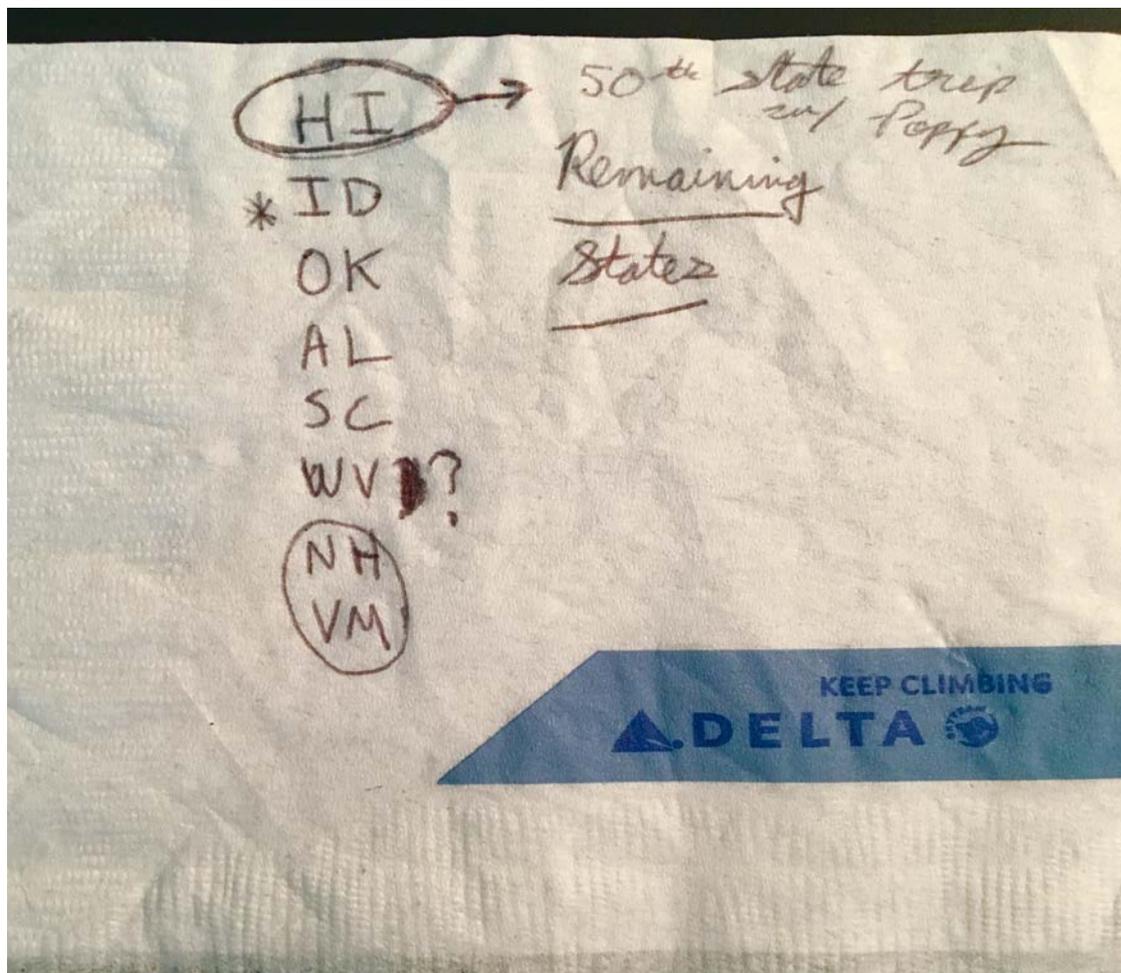
When you were younger you left me this note and ear on my pillow. I had a difficult day and you cared. I know I will always have your "ear." I have to learn to feel and hear you in the mysterious wind I saw in the hours of your departure.



You favorite song was "Big Girls Don't Cry." (By Fergie)

*...I hope you know, I hope you know
That this has nothing to do with you
It's personal, myself and I.....The path that I'm walking
I must go alone... Yes, you can hold my hand if you want to
'Cause I want to hold yours too...
It's getting late and dark outside
I need to be with myself and center
Clarity, peace, serenity....*

This is where you are now. I did hold your hand in your final moments - now engraved on a pendant around my neck. I wish your favorite song had been big boys don't cry as maybe this would have helped me with the flow of tears. If I had been with you the night your departure began, we would have already planned our 2017 summer trip. You will still be travelling with me. We were truly one. As the plane approached Salt Lake City, on our way back from Oregon in 2015, the plane was diverted to Boise. You now had 7 states left to finish all 50. You had written 8 of them down while on that flight. Idaho was now done. I will finish them for you. As you can see, HI was going to be your last state and we were going together as you wrote on this napkin. Figures, ND for me and HI for you; you had vision.



Our deepest discussions happened between our eyes. You did not know this but every time I had a significant decision in life I either asked you or thought what would Ralph say. At least, I can still do one of those. On December 22 you made me coffee before work and tied Mylar balloons to my chair. The balloon thanking me floated until two weeks ago coming down a few hours after these monuments were placed. My dear friends John and Cassandra saved those coffee grounds without my knowing. I have mixed some into the dirt here and saved the remaining for me. You often left me small gifts on my pillow like chocolate eggs, cards, and \$2.00 bills. You always thought about others and asked only when you really needed.

Those that really knew you; happily gave when you asked for help as it was rare.

I learned from Natalie that you spent hours perfecting your cursive signature. The art of cursive was fading but you believed a signature was more than a signature. In September 2016 we signed some documents and I lifted this autograph and had it placed on top of this bench. Your signature is you. Your name is you. I now have this exact signature on my right arm as you were and will always be my right hand and right way. Jasmine and Natalie these bracelets are for you. On one side is your name and on the other side is this same signature. This is a *symbol* of your connection representing each of your unique and deep emotional bonds with your brother Ralph. I have made for each of you an engraved paperweight in the same granite with his autograph.

He was truly a mentor to all of us. Yes, Jasmine your electronics will never be the same and those late night TV and cookie hours Ralph and Natalie spent together will never be the same. But some how we will take him with us. I can still see Ralph sitting in front of the oven staring at the baking cookies so he could remove them at exactly the right time. Every oven window will always remind me of your crossed legs and concern for the perfect cookie. All you knew was to bake care and kindness.



It is not supposed to be this way. I am supposed to be resting where I am standing and you are supposed to be standing where you are resting. We have this backwards or not. You always seemed to know best. Having the understanding of a sage at a very early age, you always knew even when the adults missed the cues. Nothing went past your mind.

The past number of months, I have been asked countless times at Target, Whole Foods by cashiers and random people what's wrong. In a few simple words I say my son, best friend and mentor is gone. I have had more random hugs from strangers then in my half century on the planet. The man at the U-haul store as I purchased boxes gave me a hug. I have thought all about this and believe in the fundamental human element of kindness and selfless that crosses race, religion and color. I thought people saw my pain but I now believe all of these random people were seeing the reflection of your kindness from my energy. It was not my grief; it was you they were hugging. They just were drawn to your essence. As a symbol of our bond, I have legally changed my middle name Gabriel. You were my angel.

My friends who are here today are the reason I am here today. You on a regular frequency have called and made it a point to come see me for months to make sure I had a shoulder and box of tissues. If you are here, my friend, you have been with me on this tragic, painful path that I'm breathing. You are my inner orbit of support.

Ralph, I held your hand as your heart stopped and saw the sheets moving in a mysterious wind as I sat alone in the room with you waiting for the funeral home. It was hours that felt like a second. I kissed your cold lips as you rolled away and told you I would see you soon.

I see you everyday especially while I sleep.

Our breathing lives are only a blink in the universe. My strongest belief is that the undivided moments we spend with people in non - anxious focus is truly our only legacy. When Jasmine was 5, we spent a sunny Saturday gathering sticks in the sun and built a small wooden boat from twigs that I still have. About 12 years later Jasmine came back from a trip with girlfriends with a castle built from sticks, pine, bark and seeds. I commented that it reminded me of our boat and Jasmine instantly said, " where do you think I got the idea. Ralph we are nearly 21 years of those moments. I came here on your 21st birthday and wrote this....

February 22, 2017

The school kids are

Arriving,

Yet you have left.

Still a school child with

Buds of opportunity stepped

On by the intersection of mind

And medicine. Brilliance is not

To be diagnosed - its like

artwork to be appreciated by all.

I still see your dry humor and legs crossed

staring at the chocolate chip oven cookies. I will

always stare at you waiting for the right time to

taste, smell, touch and digest the kind, mentoring

spirit that has baked my soul into the now. I loved you

the minute I saw your face and kissed your cold lips as

you where wheeled away and said I will

See you soon. I am here now on February 22, 2017. You

are 21. My son, my friend, my best buddy and part of me

as I look at the tulips and chocolate chip cookies and

Colorado river rocks which we streamed on as children

into the endless flow of river. You are now in the

endless flow of the years I have left and one day will

rest too by your side. In peace together in our special

place as we saw the limitless stars, heat lighting,

Grand Tetons and surrounded by warm hot tub water and

exchanged our special word to say "Amangani" to bring

us back together to the same place from

afar. Amangani and Happy Birthday Ralph. We are

together and I'm

Holding you close.

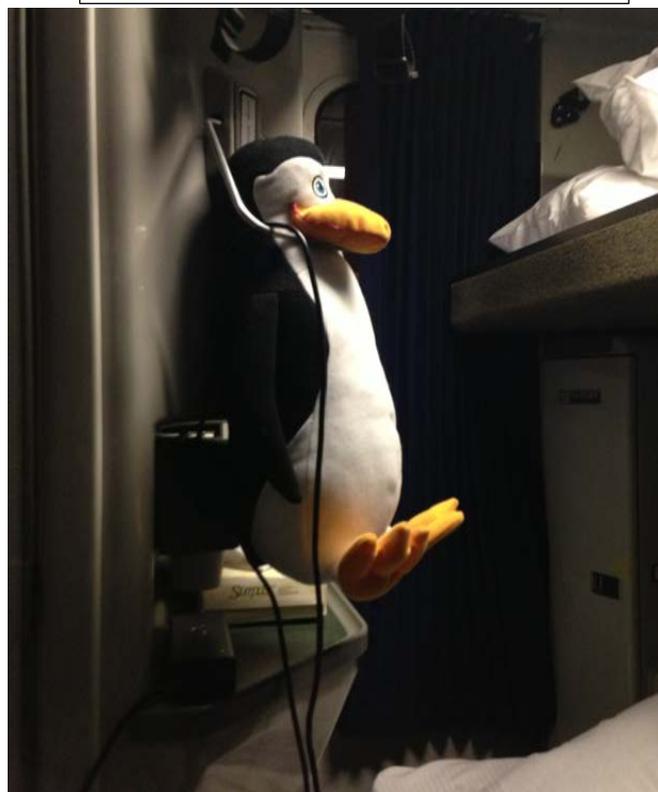
Ralph loved penguins. Besides their simple beauty and curiosity they were ethereal to Ralph. Birds that swim, and cannot fly but live their lives in peace and harmony within the limitations of their natural wonder. Larry, Ralph's Penguin always traveled with us - bringing kindness, laughter and, curiosity to our lives and those around us as we traveled on trips and sat around the house.

Ralph & Larry On a Car Trip



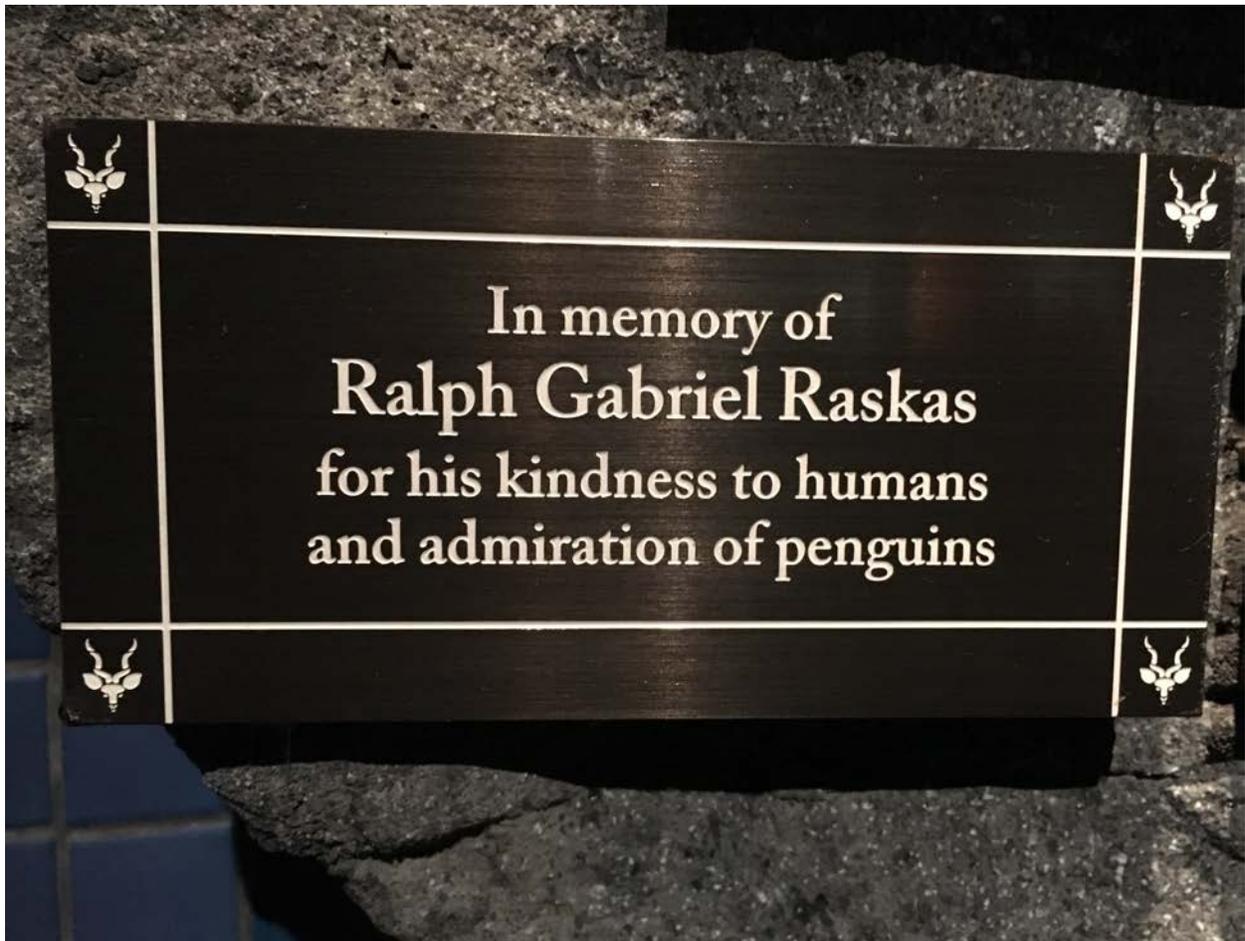
A

Amtrak DEN to SFO : Larry In His bunk bed



There is now a plaque inside the penguin exhibit at the Saint Louis Zoo.

PLAQUE INSIDE PENGUIN EXHIBIT AT SAINT LOUIS ZOO



There are TWO penguins on the back of YOUR monument. This is you and I. It is the special bond that we created over 20 years. This stone is the same granite used to rebuild the World Trade Center. From my pile of emotional rubble, I too have to rebuild.

The large boulders you see here are from the Colorado River. They are from one of our family summer trips to Aspen. They too are timeless and have lived before us and will live after us. I believe Ralph and I would have eventually found our selves near the Rocky Mountains.

Ralph had quite the dry, quick, witted sense of humor. If I was cooking and asked him to toss the salad he would ask me where? When he was in the single digits on a family summer vacation the 4 of us were in a hot tub and I had to get out to take Jasmine to the bathroom and she asked me to go with her. Upon returning, I announced I now had to go. Ralph asked me if I needed him to go with me. I think I let him. It was one of those moments.

You suffered more than any young man should in pain at merely twenty years of age. We talked for endless hours in 2016, took walks, grilled, listened to music and tried a few cigars. You truly loved the music of life as your guitar teacher tossed one of your picks into your grave last December. You rarely asked for help but when you did, I knew you needed it. I wish everyone knew that when you asked you really needed help.

A few years ago, I joined an advisory committee at Missouri Baptist Hospital. I was given a coffee mug with a quote. I intended to use the mug on a regular basis. The quote and design on the mug spoke my language. The mug was decorated with flowing branches and words – the tree of life. A few weeks after placing the mug in the kitchen cabinet it went missing. I did not think much about it thinking it was broken and subsequently thrown away. About a year ago, I found the mug. It was now a pen bucket on Ralph's desk. The quote read:

“ It's not the *years* in your life that count. It's the *life* in your years. “

Abraham Lincoln

This is the quote on the front of the monument. The mug was on Ralph's desk the night he left. Ralph had more life in his near 21 years than most have in an average lifespan. The mug is still on your desk, filled with pens, which I am typing on right now.

I am starting a program with JFCS (Jewish Family & Children Services) called "Ralph Cares" Twice a year the program will distribute hygiene totes through the food pantry to children ages 5-18. The tote idea came to me one day when reading your words after your medical mission to Nepal thinking about Ralph and how he cared. The tote with a logo will contain personal hygiene items: Toothbrushes, toothpaste and the like. Each tote will include a card talking about Ralph and his kindness and concern for people. The other side of the card will have a list of free self help services. Eating keeps us alive but looking good and feeling mentally well is what gives us hope for a better day. We all need personal sustainability and the ability to care for our selves. We expect to distribute thousands of these bags into perpetuity. Ralph will continue his kindness and caring of each and every living being. I have recently joined the board of the JFCS and will do my part and Ralph's part to continue his efforts. I, like Ralph, want to live the rest of my moments caring. I will have to carry forward Ralph's efforts in solitude with his energy. It will be your trademark and a United States trademark; sketched by Natalie.



In early high school Ralph went on a medical mission to Nepal. He authored an article at the age of 16 about this experience.

Quoting from this article he said, "Emotionally, the best activity of the fabulous trip was teaching Napoli children dental hygiene ... I have never smiled as much as I did while spending time with the Napoli kids. I now view the world with a different set of eyes. I realized that regardless of what culture people live in, we are all very similar. Humans all have the same naturally predisposed hope and aspirations for our futures. We all love to spend time with our families and friends, regardless of wealth. The Napoli people further illustrated to me that happiness is not from a multitude of wealth but the simplest pleasures life has to offer."

Jasmine, Natalie and I will never let you go.

Ralph and I referred to each other as **Best Buddies** and many of our texts were signed with a simple "**BB**". The two penguins on the back of your monument represent Ralph and I as we lived OUR MOMENTS together and will live on together. His very last text to me was...

I'm ok no worries

It is engraved right here. He wanted me not to worry even in his last minutes. He was still concerned about my well - being and what I would think in his last few minutes of conscious life. I am holding on to those words as my anchor and foundation. It is all I have.

Henry David Thoreau and his philosophy had an ongoing impact on Ralph and I. When we went on our East Coast college tour, we spent a day at Walden Pond in Concord, MA.



Walden Pond 2013

We walked and talked as Henry David Thoreau would have done and walked into his cabin. We discovered the following quote in our research....

"...LIVE AT HOME LIKE A TRAVELER..." (This is engraved on the front edge of the bench)

The quote found its way to our kitchen wall. As Natalie says, "everyday is a gift." I too will try and live each day with the energy and excitement as a traveler. We are all traveling whether we remember or not. It must be about the trip not the destination at least that is my belief. Purpose and happiness is a means of travel not a destination. I work on my travel plans each and every day since 12/23/2016.

I have no destination just moments...



and to make them *matter* as Ralph did.
I have to believe that Ralph will always have my
back.

JONATHAN GABRIEL RASKAS