



Mike Mills

July 15, 1941 - December 29, 2020

James Michael (Mike) Mills, 79, of Murphysboro, passed away Tuesday, December 29, after a brief non-COVID related illness.

Mills was born on July 15, 1941 in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. He was the fourth of five children born to Faye and Leon Mills. His siblings are Landess Mills, Robert Mills (d. 2003), Jeanette Hudgins (d. 2012), and Mary Pat Mills.

He was a 1959 graduate of Murphysboro Township High School where he made treasured life-long friends including Jean and Jim Tweedy, Sue and Richard Adams, and Frances and Eddie Fisher, among many others. He was a member of the 1958 Hall of Fame football team and was named a Distinguished Alumni in 2014.

Mills married high school sweetheart Barbara Maclin (d. 2009) in 1963. They divorced in 1971. He was married to Susie Clutts Mills from 1973 until 2001.

A graduate of the first class of Dental Technology at Southern Illinois University, he moved to Elgin, IL to further his training in prosthodontics and then returned to Murphysboro to found Murphysboro Dental Lab, supplying crowns and dental prosthetics to dentists all over the Southern Illinois region. That business, one of the oldest in Murphysboro, continued to operate until October 2019.

Always civic minded, he was an active member of the Elks and Shriners, among a number of other community organizations.

In 1988, Mills founded, along with two friends, Rob Williams and Pat Burke, the Praise the Lord Murphysboro Barbecue Cook-off, which, over 33 years, has become a crown jewel on the barbecue circuit, drawing thousands of people to Murphysboro each year. His hope was that it would help drive commerce and economic development in Murphysboro. Welcoming teams and judges from all over the world each September was the highlight of his year.

In 1985, he became the fourth owner of a tavern called Al & Ray's, initially Ellis Tavern, a bar where, for the past 100 years, you could buy a barbecue or a hamburger. He renamed it 17th Street, and began building his version of the church of barbecue and what became, over time, a legendary shrine to which people flocked from all over the world.

While he barbecued his entire life, he earned the moniker "The Legend" In the early 1990s, when he was co-captain of the Apple City Barbecue team, one of the most celebrated teams ever on the circuit. He was a four-time World Champion and three-time Grand World Champion at Memphis in May, otherwise known as the Super Bowl of Swine. He was also the 1992 Grand Champion of the Jack Daniel's World Invitational Barbecue Cooking Contest and he won the Jack Daniel's Sauce Contest that year as well. Restaurants & Institutions called him the "most-revered barbecue restaurateur in America," and the restaurant is continually lauded and included on top 10 lists of barbecue in America.

Mike was the barbecue guru at and a partner in Blue Smoke restaurant in New York City and a founding partner in Memphis Championship Barbecue in

Las Vegas. Along with his daughter, he's the co-author of two books, *Peace, Love, and Barbecue*, nominated for a 2006 James Beard Foundation award and winner of the 2006 National Barbecue Association Award of Excellence, and *Praise the Lard: Recipes and Revelations from a Legendary Life in Barbecue*. In October 2008 he was honored with the Pioneer of Barbecue award at the Jack Daniel's World Invitational Barbecue Cooking Contest. Mills was inducted into the Barbecue Hall of Fame in 2010. He's the only barbecuer with top-security clearance to board Air Force One, where he delivered barbecue to President Bill Clinton, and the only pitmaster in America who's been featured in *Vogue* magazine four times. Aspiring and seasoned barbecue restaurateurs from 45 states and 16 countries have attended the Mills family's OnCue Hospitality classes and he has helped incubate dozens of barbecue restaurants across the globe.

Mills constantly preached that there are two types of people in this world – givers and takers – and he epitomized giving. Generosity was his recipe for success. He was proud of the awards and accolades, but his deepest passion was helping others achieve their barbecue dreams. “How can I help?” was his constant refrain.

While his barbecue career has taken him all over the country, Mike's heart remained solidly in Murphysboro, where he was committed to shining a spotlight on Southern Illinois, drawing millions of people to his restaurants, and in turn, to other attractions in the area.

Equally passionate about his family, Mills was legendary for his rigid work ethic, and his children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews were all compulsory students of the Mike Mills School of Labor. Sleeping in meant rising at 6:00 am, and if the task assigned didn't result in sore muscles, sweat, and exhaustion, it was clearly not done properly. Dreaded were the words “I've

got a job for you,” but all who worked under his supervision are grateful for what was in hindsight an invaluable experience.

Mills is survived by his children, Amy Jane Mills and Christopher Mills, grandchildren Guy W. (Woody) Tunncliffe, III and Faye Landess Tunncliffe, siblings Landess Mills and Mary Pat Mills, his brother-in-law John Hudgins, and much-loved nieces and nephews: Melody Mills Corso, Gary Landess Mills (Brenda), Michael Mills (Nina), Rob Mills (Karen), Steve Mills (Tracey), Joe Hudgins (Lane), Jem Hudgins (Flo), Molly Hudgins (Tracey), and Chris Mills (Laurel) along with many great-nieces and nephews.

He was predeceased by his brother Robert (June 11, 2003) and sister Jeanette (October 1, 2012).

In lieu of flowers, the family requests with gratitude that memorials honoring Mike Mills should be made payable to Murphysboro Main Street and sent to Lisa Blake, PO Box 382, Murphysboro, IL 62966. Services will be held Monday, June 28, 2021, at the United Methodist Church, 1500 Pine Street, Murphysboro, Illinois. The family will receive visitors from 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m., followed by a memorial service at 12:00 p.m.

Previous Events

Visitation

JUN 28. 11:00 AM - 12:00 PM (CT)

Murphysboro United Methodist Church
1500 Pine St
Murphysboro, IL 62966

Memorial Service

JUN 28. 12:00 PM (CT)

Murphysboro United Methodist Church
1500 Pine St
Murphysboro, IL 62966

Tribute Wall

MM

“ Mike was my forever friend and hero who will live in my heart forever as well as the hearts of Murphysboro! RIP Buddy!! Sending our love and blessings to his family!!

Marlene McGregor - June 27, 2021 at 07:34 PM



“ Healing Tears - Blue and White was purchased for the family of Mike Mills.



January 18, 2021 at 07:56 AM

JZ

“ Mike became a good friend of mine. I hosted a few golf tournaments for charities and Mike always donated the food for me with no questions. I sponsor every year the bbq championship to give back in return. RIP my good buddy

Jim Zimmer - January 05, 2021 at 06:51 PM



“ Dish Garden with Fresh Cut Flowers was purchased for the family of Mike Mills.



January 04, 2021 at 11:50 AM

KH

“ Mike helped the Jackson County Shrine club for 24 years with the Rodeo. He was always there to provide good food and support. He will be missed by many. Sending our love and condolences to his family.

Kathy Hargraves - January 04, 2021 at 10:58 AM

PL

“ I am so sorry to hear of the passing of my mentor and hero Mike "the Legend" Mills. One thing about legends is they live on forever!!!! Mike will always be in our hearts and souls!!! Until we meet again, Paul Van Lanen in Wisconsin

Paul F Van Lanen - January 03, 2021 at 08:07 PM

TD

“ No matter how many years it was since i saw him, he always remembered my name
Terrie DAmato

Theresa Damato - January 03, 2021 at 05:59 PM

TT

“ BEST DAMNED BBQ PERSON AROUND.. ALWAYS TALKED WITH ME N THE GUEST I BROUGHT IN TO 17TH ST IN MURPHYSBORO OR MARION LOCATION.. R. I. P. MIKE YOUR BBQ MEMORIES WILL LIVE ON AROUND THE WORLD!! 🙌🍷🍷
👑

Timmy Tolbert - January 03, 2021 at 07:51 AM

GB

“ So sorry for the loss for you and your community as well as the BBQ world. I was a pal of John Willingham and know they were tough competitors! I've got a copy of "peace love and BBQ" that is signed by mike which means a lot to me.... they, he made BBQ what it is today ... and you all are in our thoughts and prayers ❤️

greg bane - January 02, 2021 at 09:25 PM

KC

“ we are so sorry to learn about mile's death for chris and amy. i know you will both miss him a lot. we are thinking about during this difficult time. jim and karen cochran

karen cochran - January 02, 2021 at 04:15 PM

DL

“ I first met Mike during the winter of 1980 when I was called for an interview at the Corner Tavern. I was newly married and looking for work. We had a beer or two and Mike asked me when I could start. The training started the next day. I stayed there for 5 years till he sold out. Mike was absolutely wonderful to work for and we became good friends. Mike told me one time if I ever needed a job to come see him, he would find something for me. RIP my friend. I'll never forget you. Dan Leslie

Dan Leslie - January 02, 2021 at 11:29 AM

CJ

“ I met Mike June 1995 when I was hired to work at Memphis Championship BBQ in Las Vegas two months after the grand opening. I was fortunate to spend many years with Mike before he moved on to other projects. He always helped whether it was to wash dishes or make salads for us servers. I would call him my salad boy and he would laugh. Mike was an easy going giving and all around great guy!

I'm proud to have worked for such a man for nearly a quarter of a century.

Prayers for his family 🙏🌺🕊️

Cyndi Joseph

cynthia joseph - January 01, 2021 at 02:49 PM

CG

“ Right after Mike bought 17th St. in 1985, 3-4 of us would meet there every Saturday morning for breakfast and to sit around and visit. Mike was a story teller and a wonderful person that will be missed by many. Rest in Peace my friend. Curt Graff.

Curt Graff - January 01, 2021 at 11:21 AM

EF

“ *Amy and family.*

Here I am with tears in my eyes and a smile on my face. My BFF is gone. Wow didn't think I would ever use that phrase. We knew him when he was a Legend in Making.

We met in the fall of 1946 at Longfellow kindergarten. Many of us became MTHS Class of '59. We had our 60th class reunion at the 17th street warehouse in 2019.

Mike and I were at the very first Murphysboro Apple Festival Parade in the early 1950's. Free donuts and apple cider. We got sick. In 2019 Mike was Grand Marshall of the Apple Festival Parade. What a trip.

Seems like each encounter with Mike generated a story and a memory. I'll let each of you recall your "Mike Mills and I" memory. I look forward to sharing my "I remember when" stories about Mike Mills over beer and BBQ.

Ed Fisher and Family

Ed Fisher - January 01, 2021 at 11:15 AM

VO

Hi, Ed. Our class lost one of our most faithful friends. I certainly didn't know him the way you did, but memories are etched in my brain. I have been so down ever since I heard the news and he will always be a friend in my heart. Take care of yourself, Ed.

Ginny Carruthers Orlina

Virginia K Carruthers Orlina - January 04, 2021 at 10:34 AM

CH

“ 17 files added to the album *Memories Album*



Crawshaw Funeral Home - December 31, 2020 at 09:02 PM