

# Being Frank

My 1 month old son Frank's middle name, Michael, is for the Archangel, who has special meaning for my family as you'll soon discover, and for my husband's father, who is also his boss. It's not always easy working for your dad, but the bond my husband and his father share is unbreakable. It's the kind I hope Collin and Frank share with their father and I share with mine.

The name Frank, besides meaning "honest," came from the other two thirds of the reason I became a teacher-one more meaningful than the other.

In a small part, Frank is named for my favorite author. Frank McCourt was an Irish-American writer who wrote "Angela's Ashes," "'Tis," and "Teacher Man" about his experiences growing up poor in New York and Ireland and returning to New York to teach. When I met him at Towson University, I told him he inspired me to become a teacher.

"What did you say your name was?" he asked.

"Robyn," I told him.

"Well, Robyn. Looks like you'll never be driving a BMW."

I'm not into flashy cars, but my goal was to teach and buy a BMW so I could write and tell him. Frank McCourt passed away on July 19th, 2009, three days before I had Collin. I was driving a Nissan Sentra at the time. Still no Beamer.

Not all teachers are broke, though. Some, like Frank Chrest, my paternal grandfather, invest wisely and find themselves rich in more ways than one.

Today, July 6th, 2012 would have been my grandfather's one hundredth birthday. He was born Francis Aloysius, but hated the name Francis and had it legally changed to Frank. Since Granddad hated the name Francis, I decided to stick with Frank. (For some reason, he wasn't fond of Aloysius in his younger years, and preferred to use Thomas, his confirmation name for his middle name.)

Granddad wasn't very tall, and was on the slim side of muscular. He always looked young for his age, despite the glasses and thinning silver hair. His brown eyes had life to them and his laugh reminded me of Barney Rubble. He liked his nails and eyebrows to be neatly trimmed - I had to do it for him a few times. His wardrobe consisted almost entirely of plaid shirts and dress slacks or shorts and loafers. He always smelled of Colgate shaving cream.

On March 8th, 2010, his funeral was held at St. Michael the Archangel in Overlea. Granddad attended the parish for over fifty years. He lived within walking distance, which is important considering that he never drove. His children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren went to school there because the three things he loved more than the Orioles, collecting coins and stamps, crabs (steamed or waiting to be caught), and the water were faith, family, and education. These are the values that have kept his large family so close together no matter where we live or what happens.

Granddad loved my grandmother, Lillian, so much that he battled depression for the greater portion of his life after losing her in 1984. Together, they'd raised five children, one of whom, their daughter Regina, they buried together in 1978. Granddad never took off his wedding ring. He was calling for my grandmother as he died.

In addition to five children, my grandfather saw seventeen grandchildren (most of whom are married; their spouses considered equal members of the brood),

seventeen great-grandchildren, and one great-great granddaughter. He loved spending time with his family, but especially the children. His house was full of toys and books that tricked us into learning, though he did record TV shows for us to watch. In one episode of "Family Matters" he showed my brother and I, someone wrote the N-word on Laura's locker. "Never use that word," he said, "It hurts people's feelings." He was the best babysitter I ever had.

Our parents scolded him for never wearing a seatbelt when he rode in the back seat with us. Once he slammed his finger in the car door and cried. We cried for him.

In the summer, Granddad rented an apartment in Ocean City for our family to share. It was crowded, but we all got along. He'd also rent houses on the Eastern Shore and took us crabbing. A week in Tilghman Island with my cousins and Granddad was the highlight of my year. While Granddad bonded with us, we bonded with each other. To this day, I consider my cousins my closest friends.

The first thing Granddad asked when he saw us as kids was, "What kind of grades are you getting?" The questions changed as we grew up, but the message - I care about you and want you to be successful - never did.

Though he never met Tabitha or Frank, he would have loved them the same.

Granddad inspired several of his grandkids to teach. In addition to Jenny and me, our cousin Becky will be teaching at Curley in the fall, where Granddad sent two sons and three grandsons. It still baffles my mind that Granddad was able to send his five children to Catholic schools on one teacher's salary. He taught special ed math to some of the roughest students middle school in Baltimore. That combination alone is enough to make any teacher quit after a week, but he did it for just over thirty years. From handling a drunken student on a field trip to being presented with a belt by an unruly student's intimidating father, who asked my grandfather to

discipline the boy with it (I like to believe he didn't), Granddad had his share of stories. He was strict, but patient and quick-witted. Sometimes he would make my brain hurt as a child with his riddles. I can't even begin to imagine the mental hurt he put on his students with his challenging methods.

When I decided to become a teacher, Granddad told me, "Now, Robyn. You're a pretty girl and there's a good chance one of your students might ask you to a dance. When that happens, you should say, 'I appreciate the offer, but I can't go with you because I'm your teacher.'" Thankfully that's never happened.

On the last day of school, I'd always visit Granddad, who'd been moved to an assisted living home due to macular degeneration, which had left him nearly blind. Several family members invited him to move in with them, but he refused. So, he had visitors nearly every day, instead, including me, bringing ice cream on the last day of my second school year.

As he savored the frozen Snickers bar, he told me, "If you can finish your third year of teaching with a smile on your face, you'll be a teacher forever.

A year later, seven months pregnant with Collin, I visited again, with a Dunkin Donuts Coolata, not sure whether to smile or cry. "I love teaching, but I'm not sure I'll be able to do it forever," I told him. "It gets easier," he said. And it has.

It's not always easy. Teaching. Parenting. Life. Losing my beloved cousin Nancy to pancreatic cancer in January 2012 was devastating to me and to our family, especially Granddad, who joined his wife, daughter, and granddaughter less than two months later.

At the funeral, Fr. Tewes eulogized Granddad as being a "delightful" man. It's how I will always remember him and why I named my son after him.

Frank Michael, as you sleep sweetly in your cozy little swing, I'm glad we chose this name for you. If anyone ever teases you for having an old man's name, it's probably because they weren't lucky enough to have an inspiring older person in their life. I was. Your daddy was. You and Collin will be, too. Remind the naysayers that we'll all be old one day. Hopefully we handle it well.

It's too soon to know where your life will take you or what kind of person you'll be. If you're anything like my grandfather or yours, you'll do just fine.