

Tony Filippis Remembered

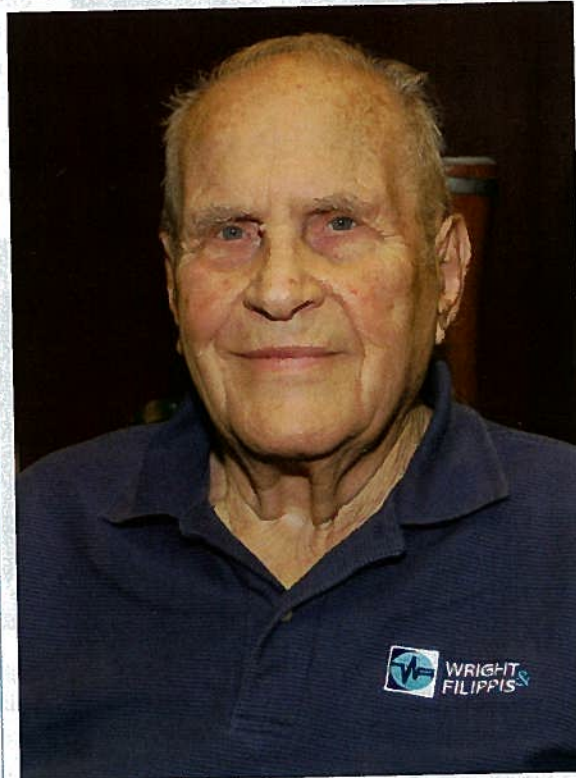
Practitioner and philanthropist **Tony Filippis**, who successfully fought for the rights of the disabled and others in need, died in January of this year.

For anyone who knew or had heard of Anthony "Tony" Filippis Sr., whether a friend, colleague, patient, relative or one of the thousands of people who benefited from his extraordinary courage and generosity, the death of this humble man earlier this year was a loss. More than the loss, however, was a deeply felt admiration and gratitude for his fortunately long and remarkably accomplished life.

The beginnings

Most anyone having anything to do with people with disabilities likely knows the fascinating story of Tony Filippis. It began on a day in April 1929, when the then 13-year-old Filippis fell from a train while on his way to go swimming with friends. Somehow, his feet got injured beyond repair from hitting the tracks. Unable to save his legs, doctors amputated both legs below the knees.

From an early age, Filippis had a fierce love of all kinds of sports. This passion would serve him well later on as a powerful advocate for people with disabilities. As a young man, he experienced discrimination because of his limb loss. He would get hired at various places and as soon as they found out his legs were missing, they would fire him.



Tony Filippis
1915 - 2007

Providence

One day, Filippis went to his prosthetist, the late **Carl Wright**, and talked to Wright about his distressing experiences in the world of employment, or unemployment, as was the case for him. As providence had it, Wright offered Filippis an apprentice position. Ten years later, they formed their own company, Wright & Filippis. Today, the company, headquartered in Rochester Hills, Mich., has 30 facilities throughout Michigan and the Midwest.

Powerful advocate

Since the mid 1940s, Filippis had been a constant and tireless advocate for people with disabilities, often through various sports activities and programs. Not only did he develop such programs as swimming, boxing (he also trained amateur fighters), bowling, baseball, golf and more, he also participated in them. He won several gold medals when he was in his 80s. Filippis not only helped people with disabilities, but he also provided assistance for many people who simply needed financial help – from the homeless to people with grave illnesses who could not afford medical treatment.

Grand achievement

His ultimate achievement, however, was in 1999 when he founded the Athletes with Disabilities Hall of Fame, a nonprofit organization that recognizes and honors distinguished disabled athletes who are positive role models in the state of Michigan. The organization continues to educate the public about the potential of people with disabilities and provides scholarships, recreational and educational programs.

Personal experiences

While it is impossible to describe the tremendous impact Filippis had on people during his life in a short article such as this, as a small tribute, *O&P Business News* interviewed a few of Filippis's close friends:

By Rachel Kelley



HELPING OTHERS

“ I met Tony about 30 years ago as a patient. We subsequently became tremendous friends. Later, I came down with leukemia and had to have a bone marrow transplant and he would come in the hospital every day to give me new socks for my prosthesis. Some years later, I got pneumonia and almost passed away and he was there again to take care of me.

He was the first guy to sponsor my TV show called *Disabilities Today* on PBS.

Tony was a compassionate man who would give you the shirt off his back. There was not an organization out there he did not donate to. If he would have lived 2 more years, I jokingly say he would have had only \$20 left in his bank account. He was a grand person. The night he died, I was picking him up to take him to a wheelchair basketball game he was sponsoring against some superstars in the NBA.”

“Tony always said, ‘You have to walk in my shoes.’ He walked on two prosthetic legs and so he realized what all his patients were going through. He knew they needed accessibility, recreation, education and jobs. Employment was big with Tony. He used the sports programs to show that people can go out and compete and that idea of competition could be transferred into the employment arena.

He would make sure people got the ramp, the new legs or controls for their automobile. Tony lived to see the looks on people’s faces when they received these things. You could go to him and ask for something and he would always say yes.

He was a confidant and mentor to me. I used to say it is so exciting to be disabled now because so many good things are happening. I would tell him that I wish I were 20 years younger and he would reply, ‘I am 90 and you are 70. You are 20 years younger.’ Tony was always concerned who was going to come after us. He has a great bunch of young people plowing that same field he started.”

— Roger McCarville

GIVING HIS BEST

“ Tony was a great man. You knew that when you were around him you were in the presence of someone special. He must have known his destiny at an early age because he lived his life with such ferocity, focus and single-mindedness, and all for the benefit of the disabled.

He was determined to not let anyone suffer the indignities that he had suffered, and he achieved that goal in many ways, many times. I felt proud to have known him and to be in his company. I was extremely fortunate to enjoy the fruits of his talent and ability and through that relationship of patient-orthotist, to become friends.

As a polio survivor I require a lift in one of my shoes. It is a difficult lift to do due to certain complications. I searched a long time for someone to make the lift properly when I happened upon Tony in his little shop on Woodward Avenue in Palmer Park, Detroit. He welcomed me with open arms and did my lift perfectly. That was 31 years ago. Tony and I were friends from that day forward. He always gave me his best. He always found time for me, and he always boosted my spirits with comforting words or with joy he could not hide when talking about one of his new projects or adventures having to do with the disabled community. Tony was an outstanding example of a person living his life to the fullest. I learned a lot from him and I miss him dearly.”

— Cynthia Hewa



GIVING BACK

“ I met Tony in 1976. I had polio in 1949 when I was 12 years old, about the same age he lost his legs. He believed that discrimination directed at people with disabilities was intolerable. He spent his whole life trying to correct that situation and provide venues and avenues for people with disabilities so they could participate on an equal basis with able-bodied folks.

His focus in the last 10 years ever since the Athletes with Disabilities Hall of Fame was launched, was the recognition of people with disabilities who were outstanding athletes. This organization was a way of providing awareness to the nondisabled community that people with disabilities can excel, even in sports.

I had great respect for him. He was such a good-hearted person. He gave back to the world 110%.”

— Paul Ulrich

GENEROUS TO A FAULT

“ I met Tony about 30 years ago. He was such a grand figure. He became such a dear friend over the years. I feel like I have always known him. He was generous to a fault and so caring. We gave him the Lifetime Achievement Award at our da Vinci award dinner. He was the one getting the award, yet he was so humble and was thanking everyone else.

What was important to him was accessibility for all people with all kinds of disabilities and that they be mainstreamed into society seamlessly. He treated patients with the greatest love and care. I have heard stories of him visiting patients in the hospital on Christmas day. That was Tony.”

— Patricia McDonald, president of the Michigan chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society



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KNOCKING DOWN WALLS

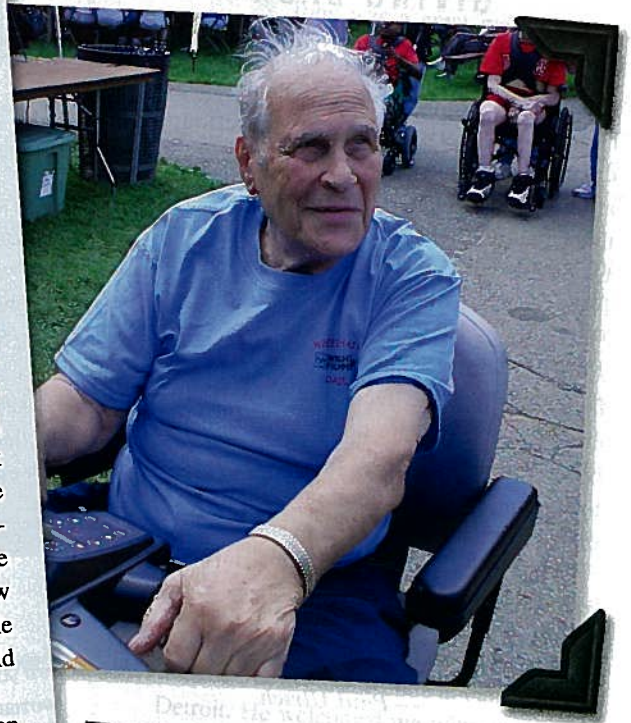
“People have said to me that I have big shoes to fill. They wonder if I have the passion my dad did. I do not think anyone could have the passion he had because he lived a life early on when he lost his legs of discrimination and being shunned and pushed aside. Unless you have lived that, it is hard to have the passion he had for overcoming it. What drove him were people saying he could not do things. They said he could not play sports such as baseball, bowling, boxing and many others. He played numerous sports and excelled at them. He loved boxing. They would not let him box because of his prostheses. So he thought, ‘Okay, if I cannot compete then I am going to help train boxers,’ which he did. If he needed to get from here to there and there was a wall in the way, he would either figure out how to knock down the wall or get around it no matter what the situation was. There are stories of him crawling up steps at a building to make a point because the building was not barrier free for people with disabilities. He would get arrested on purpose because they were not going to allow handicapped parking for an event and that made things inaccessible to people. When he saw things that were unfair, he did what he could to change it for himself and others.”

“In the early days, my dad went back to school and became an accountant. He got several jobs, one of them at Ford Motor Company. After 2 days, they told him he forgot to take his physical. During the physical, they asked him to pull his pants down. The minute they saw he was an amputee they fired him. He got frustrated about this attitude of the many employers he encountered. He happened to be seeing Carl Wright as his prosthetist at the time. Carl asked him if he was interested in learning the trade. He worked for Carl and 10 years later he went out on his own. He was a great example of what you can make of your life. There were not any ‘can’ts’ in his life. That benefited his patients and all our employees.”

“When I close my eyes and think of my dad, I visualize him in his long lab coat standing in front a Troutman router carving a wood socket. My dad was always available to anyone; whether someone needed something in the middle of the afternoon or the middle of the night, he was there. He would read an article in the paper and the next thing I knew we were doing a fundraiser for an individual no one really knew, but the person just needed help. Whether they were blind, amputees, paraplegics, it did not matter.

It goes back to him trying to level the playing field for people who the scales were tipped against.”

— A.J. Filippis, CPO, president and chief executive officer of Wright & Filippis



Rachel Kelley is a staff writer for O&P Business News.