

Honoring Kevin Parnell

"Some of it's magic, some of it's tragic. But I had a good life all the way."

Good afternoon, everyone.

For those who may not know me, my name is Wolfgang Hackenberg. I lived with the Parnell family as a German exchange student from May to July 1998. Those three months – really just 10 weeks because of spring break – laid the foundation for a strong relationship that has lasted over 26 years and changed my life forever.

In 1998, Becky was my teacher at Littleton High School. After I had some trouble with my first host family, I missed a few classes. One day, I met Becky in the hallway and explained my situation to her. She didn't hesitate; she just said, and I still remember those words: "Oh, you can live with us." And I said, "YES!" We often laughed later when Becky told the story of how that night, she had to tell Kevin and her two teenage daughters that she had invited a tall German fella – totally unknown to them – to live with them.

I still remember the first time I then met Kevin. It was on the field during a track meet in Littleton, and Earny Diller – my teacher and high-jumping coach at the time – introduced us. Kevin saw me for the first time and said with a big smile, "Oh, I have to go grocery shopping!" And boy, did we do some All-American grocery shopping. It became something we loved to do together. On that field back in 1998 Kevin gave me a chance – me an unsecure, tall, back-then skinny German, coming from a difficult relationship with my first host family. He opened his heart and home to me. He trusted Becky and believed in the good. He showed me how a positive family life is created and how trustful relationships are built. That changed my life forever, and I still benefit from it today. For that, I will always be thankful.

As time passed, our bond grew even stronger. We made it a point to meet in person nearly every two years. During that time, two of my brothers – Herwig and Gereon – also became exchange students with the Parnells, and many other family members and friends visited. The Parnell house was always open to everyone—literally, the front door was never locked. Today, my father, at 84 years old, has made the journey from Germany with his wife to honor Kevin and state the deep, lasting bond between our families.

I'll deeply miss the weekly phone calls during the halftime of Broncos games with Kevin. His opening line was always: "Everything ok in the fatherland?" His humor was unmatched, and his ability to speak bits of accent-free German – often trash-talking – never failed to make me laugh. But our conversations were more than just jokes. They often started with sports but inevitably led to discussions about family and politics.

I was honored to be a part of Emily's wedding, just as the Parnell family was there for mine in 2014, traveling with all their children and grandchildren to Germany. Last year, we all gathered with the 10 Parnells at my house in Bavaria and enjoyed a memorable

family vacation in Switzerland, which I'll cherish forever. It was the last family vacation of the Parnell family.

We've already heard many wonderful things about Kevin today. Someone – I believe it was Aaron – recently called him "the full package." I can only agree with that. Kevin was the full package in so many ways. He was the dream of every German idealizing about the perfect American: half cosmopolitan, half couch potato, with his head in the world, but his heart purely American. He had a great grasp of history, yet was also stunningly good at sports. He never judged, yet often asked the smartest questions. And everything was infused with his great sense of humor and positive approach to life.

But the most impressive thing about Kevin was his relationship with his family, especially with Becky. The two of them were so different, and yet so closely united. In those 26 years, there must have been real conflicts, but I never witnessed them. The respect and admiration they had for each other, the positive way they interacted, the way they accepted each other's weaknesses and admired each other's strengths, the full support for each other, all that was truly incredible. We can all learn something from them and should do so.

One of my fondest memories with Kevin is from our long road trips, picking up or dropping off Emily or Leslie at university. We'd listen to Jimmy Buffett, and Kevin would whistle along perfectly to the tunes. He was an incredible whistler! We sang those songs for hours, and there's one line that has stuck with me all these years. I'd like to close with it. In his song "He went to Paris" Jimmy Buffett sang: "Some of it's magic, some of it's tragic. But I had a good life all the way." That line sums up Kevin perfectly – an admirable man who always found the magic and the positive side in life and shared it with everyone around him.

I've never been much of a birthday person. That day just never meant as much to me as it does to others. Kevin passed away on September 6th, 2024 – my 44th birthday. And though many people might think it's sad that my birthday will always be associated with such a loss, I feel totally different. Now, this day has a very special meaning for me. It connects me and Kevin even more deeply for the rest of my life, and that makes me proud and happy.

Kevin, my American Dad, thank you for everything. You'll always be my role model, and though I'll miss you deeply, I will carry your memory and the lessons from your life with me always.

Auf Wiedersehen, Kevin, und Danke für alles. Ich werde Dich nie vergessen!