In a very real sense, the man from hard-scrabble Lowell was “Everyman”—living the hard daily struggle of the Irish in his early years, battling the prejudice of “No Irish Need Apply,” and never forgetting those glorious roots.

And later, as president of Metropolitan Coal and Oil, Billy understood better than anyone the struggle of so many customers to keep a roof over their heads, put three meals a day on the table, and keep their families warm.

My mother served on the board of NFL Charities with Billy. Once, they worked hard together to obtain the support of other board members for one of Billy’s many charities. They succeeded beautifully, and a check was duly prepared for a dramatic presentation at an NFL halftime show.

Until a little problem materialized. It turned out that Billy’s project hadn’t taken the steps to qualify for a tax deduction. Billy knew there was no problem with the charity—the problem had to be with the IRS.

On another occasion, my mother was at LaGuardia Airport, about to drive to Green-\nwich, Connecticut, with a lawyer bent on pressing complex legal problems. By chance, Billy arrived on the scene, say my mother in distress, and insisted on joining her for the long ride to Greenwich. Every time the lawyer tried to bring up the legal problem, Billy the raconteur broke in, launching into yet another wild and funny Sullivan story that left my mother laughing and the lawyer fuming.

In so many ways, Billy was a member of our family, too. He’d regale us with stories about his father’s friendship with the Fitzgeralds, with Honey Fitz.

Over the years, during some of the most trying moments of my life, I would get a long, hand-written letter from Billy, offering comfort and wisdom, lighting the way ahead. That was vintage Billy—always guiding, always reaching out, always helping, always caring.

Above all, there was this magnificent family which sustained him and which is his greatest monument of all—Mary, the great joy of his life; Tess and Eleanor, the sisters whose independence and strength he so admired; Chuck and Patrick, who did so much to build the team of his dreams; Jeannie and Kathleen and Nancy, who took such enormous pride; Billy, who made so much difference in his father’s final years.

Near the end of “Pilgrim’s Progress,” there is a passage that tells of the death of Valiant, in words that apply to Billy Sullivan, too.

“Then, he said, I am going to my father’s, and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not regret me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me, that I have fought his battle who now will be my rewarder.

When the day that he must go hence was come, many accompanied him to the river side, in which as he went he said, “Death, where is thy sting?” and as he went down deeper, he said, “Grave, where is thy victory?” So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

We loved you, Billy—we loved your marvelous way of showing your beautiful love of family, your laugh that could fill our hearts with laughter, too, your giant Irish heart. We miss you, Billy, and we always will.