

Reagan's Son To Morris Supporters: My Dad's Spirit Lives Inside You

Michael Reagan spoke in front of about 700 at annual dinner at Sheraton Parsippany Hotel.

By Joe Tyrrell | February 5, 2011

Marking the centennial of Ronald Reagan's birth, his son told a cheering throng of the late president's fans that they carry his legacy in their hearts and minds.

Author and commentator Michael Reagan kept a full house of 700 attendees at the Sheraton Parsippany Hotel enthralled at the annual New Jersey Reagan Day dinner with tales of his own childhood and his father's career.



The crowd included former Gov. Thomas Kean and much of Morris County's Republican establishment, but also hundreds of regular people for whom President Reagan remains a hero. His son told them the best way to celebrate his father is by continuing on a path of cheerful conservatism and good works.

"You've got Ronald Reagan living inside you," he said. "Enjoy it, live it and love it."

While suggestions like adding his father's likeness to Mount Rushmore are flattering to his family, "you don't need to do that to honor my father," Reagan said. Instead, he urged involvement with groups like one of the evening's sponsors, Young America's Foundation, which promotes conservative education.

Michael Reagan's presence gave a lift to what has quickly become a well-established event, according to Assemblyman Jay Webber (R-Morris Plains), the master of ceremonies and one of the original organizers. He recalled starting the event in 2004 with four tables and a sheet cake in a room over a firehouse.

Turnout has steadily grown, and past attendees estimated it doubled this year. The reason?

"Michael Reagan," said Parsippany resident Nancy Finby, "and, of course, President Reagan."

The speaker also was the draw for first-time attendee James Blunt. A former West Orange resident, he said he was chased to the Poconos in 2006 by rising property taxes and the welter of regulations, varying from town to town, affecting his construction business.

Blunt recalled casting his first presidential vote for Reagan, and is happy to see a revival of interest in his beliefs at a time when the political outlook is otherwise foggy.

"I think it's good for the country," he said. "We've got to get back to it."

For an event with a pointed conservative theme, though, Michael Reagan emphasized not just his father's strongly held beliefs, but what he said was a willingness to work with others and share credit.

After videos that included the 1984 "Morning in America," Michael Reagan pointed out what he said was the difference between his father's often genial approach and the current poisonous political atmosphere.

"My father always looked for the good in people," Reagan said, saying that as governor of California and president, he worked closely with Democratic majorities.

The adopted son of Reagan and his first wife, the actress Jane Wyman, Reagan said his parents taught him to be thankful for what he had and not to get too full of himself. Even after they divorced, when he was 3, they cooperated to raise the family, he said.

"Michael is one of our students' favorite speakers," said Kimberly Begg of the Herndon, Va., foundation, which saved Ronald Reagan's California ranch 13 years for preservation as a historic site and education center.

Michael Reagan told stories about how his father taught him about tax policy by keeping his allowance at \$1 until President Lyndon Johnson signed a tax cut in 1964.

"He was a man of his word, and raised my allowance to \$5," Reagan said. "It probably seemed like a lot to him, but by then I was in high school and it didn't seem like much to me."

But he also shared his family's shock and dismay when their father told them at the 1976 Republican convention that he was about to lose the party's closely contested presidential nomination. Such findings were a shock for a generation whose parents were closed-mouthed about troubles, Reagan said.

With nothing prepared, Ronald Reagan was startled when President Gerald Ford nevertheless asked him to address the convention, Michael said. Nancy Reagan, his father's second wife, "Told him, 'You'll think of something.'"

Michael Reagan said his father's speech about the dangers of both the Soviet Union and of nuclear war galvanized the convention and helped set the stage for the complex policy courses he charted in office.

His increase in military spending is credited by many with speeding the break-up of the Soviet Union, which strained its resources trying to keep up. Yet the same time, Reagan spoke passionately about his desire to eliminate "totally irrational" nuclear weapons.

His father was able to quickly fashion such a speech, and make nuanced policy decisions, because they came from a strong core of beliefs, not from polling, Michael Reagan said.

With a nation full of celebrations of President Reagan's Feb. 6, 1911, birth including one at the Super Bowl, Reagan said it was the YAF's involvement that cause him to choose Parsippany for a major commemoration.

"I do a lot of work with Young America's Foundation, and they set it up a year ago," Reagan said after his speech, while patiently posing for pictures and signing autographs for roughly half the crowd. "It was just great, great to be back."

"He's a great speaker," said someone who brought another famous name to the gathering, Elizabeth Springsteen.

She admitted to be a very distant relative of singer Bruce Springsteen, "not close enough for bragging." Another first-time attendee at the event, she found it "very worthwhile."