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## IN CHARLIE'S SHOES

By Donna Bettencourt  
InAlliance 1997



These shoes I am wearing were hardly worn when I received them. They belonged to a man who had little use for shoes. On more than one occasion, backseat passengers found them sailing past their window as he threw them out the front window. He shuffled when he walked; the soles were worn evenly with little wear to the heels or the toe. He always had the best shoes. Charlie's dad always saw that he had the best shoes.

When Charlie died last year, all his gently worn shoes ended up in a large cardboard box on the front porch of his house in his east Sacramento neighborhood. I came over to welcome Eddie, the new roommate of Charlie's bereft former roommate, to the new home. Charlie's absence had created a rare opportunity for a man who had spent his entire lifetime in board and care facilities and before that state hospitals. I welcomed him and noted the cardboard box labeled "Please pick up" on the front porch.

I mentioned the box of shoes to Eddie and to others present that early afternoon. I picked out two pairs from the box. Would they fit Eddie? No. How about Pete? Then surely, they will fit Mike. On his staff salary, he could use some good shoes. No, too small. They seemed destined for the thrift store, until Mike said, "How about you?!!" I tried both pairs on and they fit perfectly. I had known and supported Charlie in his struggle to live a good life for over 9 years. I had been by his bedside on two occasions in the emergency room and on another at this bedside in the hospital after major surgery. I still laugh when I remember Charlie laying on the gurney in the emergency room after a rainy February day caused a driver to hit the car he had been driving in. His eyes were wide and he was mute, as he always was, except when he seized. The ER nurse commented as she breezed by, "Don't worry; I'm sure that he'll be able to speak with you as soon as the neck brace is off." I wished he could have.

The summer after Charlie died; I traveled north to the Anacortes Islands, shod in Charlie's shoes. "You are wearing a dead man's shoes?" my mother asked. At first, there was a certain morbidity to wearing his shoes, as I laced them up. After a while, that feeling left as I took Charlie on my travels. I hiked up to the top of Mt. Constitution in Moran State Park in Charlie's Nike hiking boots. I stood on the deck of a sailboat and watched orcas whales leap in the waters off Canada. I danced with my three-year-old son in an old Orcas Island orchard in Chuck's sneakers. When I returned to Sacramento, I wrote my testimony for the legislative hearings on SB1038 with Charlie's tennis shoes tucked under my desk at work. Charlie never was able to see the whales, or hike to that high mountain, and his testimony to the legislature was never heard. And he never danced with his son.

I wore Charlie's shoes in places that he never could; his shoes took me to places that I never could have gone. I literally walked in Charles's shoes and continue to now. We, as professionals and family members, should remember that we all only attempt to walk in shoes that are not our own.

Thank you, Charlie. For the shoes and for the opportunity to walk in them. I remember you every time I lace them as a Catholic remembers his faith when he fingers his beads. I remember you and the trust you had in me.