

News

'MIKE, TERRI AND ME': FOREVER TOGETHER

By **Anita Kumar St. Petersburg Times**

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The one-story brick house sits in a carefully tended yard in a cul de sac, a gray Honda minivan parked in the driveway shaded by trees. Hospice, the license plate says, Every day is a gift.

Inside, he reads his daughter to sleep and changes his son's diapers. He steps over disregarded toys and animal books and escapes with the Sopranos and Extreme Home Makeover, slipping happily into someone else's drama. He works 12-hour days to keep the bills at bay and yawns as he sits on the couch. She reminds him to take out the trash, and he does.

This is Michael Schiavo's new life. Life after Terri.

Every day is a gift.

MOVING ON

In the year since Terri Schiavo died the most public of deaths, Michael still leads two lives.

He guards his privacy but has written a book about the years-long political and ethical battle he waged to remove his wife's feeding tube. He fails to keep up with happenings in Tallahassee and Washington yet has started his own political action committee. He removes all signs of his first wife from his house yet welcomes recognition and comments from strangers about what he did for her.

The book, *Terri: The Truth*, which was released in bookstores last month, calls for education about living wills and eating disorders and for fighting politicians, activists, anyone intervening in end-of-life decisions.

Mike -- known by the world as Michael but called Mike by family members and friends -- says a lot has happened to him in the past year but not much has changed.

He buried his wife. Changed jobs. Got married. Was promoted.

But much of the bitterness remains, dividing the family, dividing America.

These days, there are only flashes of the elusive, arrogant Michael Schiavo the world got to know. He's more reflective now but still has to remind himself sometimes not to get angry.

"This was the biggest right-to-die case in history. This will never, ever go away. So everybody has to learn to live with it and just get on," he said in a lengthy, wide-ranging interview. "I can't make it go away. It will always be there. But you can teach yourself how to move on."

Has he taught himself to move on? Not quite, he said, but he's working on it.

A NEW LIFE

After his wife's death on March 31, 2005, Mike left town for two months. He and his longtime girlfriend, Jodi Centonze, took their two young children to a friend's beach house.

Mike, a registered nurse, took the extended time off from work at the Pinellas County Jail after his co-workers donated vacation days to him. They contributed so many days that he gave some back.

The family returned to their home in Countryside, where they had lived quietly for years, before the case ever landed in court.

The four-bedroom house with the sage green trim and enclosed swimming pool sits alongside five other houses. It was there that camera crews camped out on the sidewalk and activists threw roses for Terri on the front lawn.

Mike helps supervise the 150 nurses who care for the jail's 3,600 inmates. His schedule is never the same two weeks in a row. These days he comes home at 7 p.m. It used to be midnight.

Jodi, whom Mike calls Jo, had worked her way from file clerk to vice president at an insurance agency when she quit in 2000 after the company was sold. She stays home with their kids now and the family lives off Mike's annual salary of \$68,500.

Three-year-old Olivia loves all princesses from Cinderella to Belle. She prances around the house in her bathing suit, hoping for time in the pool. She attends a Catholic preschool three days a week.

Nicholas, 2, likes Thomas the Tank Engine, climbing and beating up on his sister. He never tires of stuffing big chunks of banana in his mouth.

"Meow. Meow," Nicky grins. No one knows where he got that. The family has a dog, a golden retriever named Samantha.

The couple have never considered moving from Pinellas County where his former in-laws, the Schindlers, still live and where Schiavo has been a household name for years.

"Why should I?" asked Mike, 42, wearing shorts and a T-shirt while eating his usual chicken Caesar salad from a favorite Italian restaurant on a recent Sunday night.

Mike notices strangers nudging each other when they catch sight of him in a restaurant or shop. Every few days, someone will approach him.

"They talk. They whisper. When they say something to me, it's always complimentary," he said. "I had one gentleman tell me the other day that I'm his hero."

Jodi, 41, is never recognized. In the dozen years she has known and loved Mike, she has never attended a court hearing or spoken publicly. Until now.

Almost at the last minute, Jodi decided to join Mike as he embarked on a week's worth of national publicity to talk about the book.

"How do you prepare for that? I don't know. You never know what people are going to say or do to you," she said, curled up on the couch wearing jeans with her curly brown hair pulled back. "I am not embarrassed or ashamed of who I am."

Inside their house, there is no sign of Terri. Photos of her are stored under the bed in the master bedroom, where Jodi worked with a professional decorator to develop their sophisticated dark wood and animal motif.

Mike packed away years of newspaper clippings, magazine articles, documents and letters about Terri in two huge plastic bins. They sit in the garage, alongside an old dining room table and outdated toys.

He said he will pull the boxes out one day when his children are old enough to hear about Terri. He hopes they will be proud.

TOGETHER TO THE END

Mike and Jodi met in July 1993. Mike was visiting a friend, who is an orthodontist. Jodi was sitting in the waiting room.

It had been three years since Terri's heart mysteriously stopped in 1990, depriving her brain of oxygen and leaving her in what her doctors called a persistent vegetative state.

Mike and Jodi became friends, and he said he gradually realized he was falling in love with her. He said he broke up with her three or four times as he struggled with the guilt of loving two women at the same time. He worried about dragging Jodi into his messy life.

"I knew the score when I met him," she said. "I didn't expect Mike to turn his back on Terri, just to move on to an easier life with me."

He eventually asked Jodi to marry him in October 1994. She said yes, though she felt uncomfortable wearing a ring at first. They bought a home together in 1995 and years later decided to have children without knowing when they would marry.

Mike and Jodi were together through almost every legal decision about Terri, through the entire battle with the Schindlers, through the political fight. These days, it's Jodi, even more than Mike, who can't seem to stop talking about the case, constantly steering their conversations back to the Schindlers, the anger still apparent after all these years.

Jodi said she felt like she knew Terri from Mike and his large family. Early on they often misspoke and called her Terri.

After Mike's mother died, Jodi took over the Terri chores. With help from nurses and aides, Jodi did Terri's laundry each week and shopped for the clothes, makeup and perfume Mike insisted she keep wearing in bed.

Jodi visited Terri once, in 2000. Judge George Greer ordered that the feeding tube be removed. It was supposed to be the end, and Jodi wanted to say goodbye.

In March 2005, Terri Schiavo was still alive and her case had become a national cause. Mike still was arguing for her feeding tube to be removed; her parents still were arguing against it, saying she could recover. Court appeals were exhausted. Gov. Jeb Bush and the Legislature had tried to intervene on the side of Terri's parents. **Congress** and President Bush were about to step in.

As protesters and TV cameras camped out at their house, Jodi worried about their children. She asked Mike something she had never asked before: Give up the fight.

They argued for hours until he agreed. Then he called his attorney, George Felos.

Felos reminded him that the case was now bigger than Terri Schiavo. He said it was about everyone who wanted to be able to refuse medical treatment, everyone who didn't want the government to intervene in their lives.

Mike told Jodi he had changed his mind, that he would not walk away. Jodi did. She packed her bags and left with the kids.

"I was done," she said. "It was no longer Mike and the Schindlers. It was Mike and the governor and then Mike and the president. Forget it already. This is crazy. You are just one little person from Florida. Enough already."

She came back the next morning.

Mike and Jodi planned to wait until April 2006 -- a full year after Terri's death -- to get married. Friends persuaded Jodi to stop caring what people would think and move up the date.

The invitations were mailed in early December. Word didn't leak until the day before the Jan. 21 ceremony. Jodi's wedding planner used her last name for most arrangements. Jodi bought her dress under her mother's maiden name. Even the photographer was asked to sign a confidentiality agreement. The first one refused.

About 90 people attended the wedding at a Catholic church in Safety Harbor and reception at East Lake Country Club where everything from the bridesmaids' dresses to the M&Ms, the couple's favorite, fit in with a black and white theme.

At each place setting was a note announcing that a donation had been made to Hospice of the Florida Suncoast in memory of Mike and Jodi's parents. And in memory of Terri.

At the wedding, Mike wore his new wedding band, a circle of diamonds almost three carats in weight. He asked Jodi Schiavo if it would be OK if he also wore another ring, one he fashioned long ago out of diamonds from Terri's wedding ring. She said yes.

"It's always been Mike, Terri and me," she said softly.

POLITICAL CAUSE

Mike doesn't read the daily newspaper that lands on his front walk. He doesn't follow the **Florida Legislature** or Congress either.

But he knows he needs to start. He has formed a political action committee, TerriPAC, to raise money and challenge the politicians who tried to intervene in his effort to remove Terri's feeding tube. He has raised \$10,000 so far.

"People who got involved in my life should have never gotten involved," he said. "If they can do it to me, they can do it to you. They are voted and elected in to run the country, not my life. Or anybody else's life."

Mike said he hopes his book will spur more interest in his cause.

He said he has no plan to seek public office, though he said "quite a few people" asked him to run for U.S. Senate.

Mike said he won't earn any money from the PAC or from what he expects to be regular speaking engagements. He won't say what he received for writing the book.

Mike and Jodi Schiavo switched from registered **Republicans** to registered **Democrats** after Terri died. Mike said it's not about partisan politics and said he will support Republicans or Democrats, even though it was the GOP majority in the Legislature and Congress that tried to prolong Terri's life.

He plans to endorse candidates this year in many races, including the Florida governor's race. Both Democratic candidates, state **Sen. Rod Smith** and U.S. Rep. Jim Davis, vocally opposed legislative efforts to reinsert the tube.

'SHE'S FREE'

Terri was cremated and her ashes were buried at a cemetery in Clearwater. A brass grave marker inscribed with the words "I kept my promise" and a simple marble bench overlook a pond with a fountain in the center.

Jodi Schiavo helped find possible sites. Mike made the final decision.

"I think Terri would have been very proud and very happy," Mike said. "I did what she wanted. She's set free."

TERRI SCHIAVO'S DEATH: A READING LIST

In the year since her death, a number of people have written about the case, including:

A Life That Matters: The legacy of Terri Schiavo -- A lesson for us all

By Mary and Robert Schindler, Terri Schiavo's parents; Bobby Schindler, her brother; and Suzanne Schindler Vitadamo, her sister.

Terri: The Truth

Michael Schiavo, Terri Schiavo's husband, and Michael Hirsch

Using Terri: The Religious Right's Conspiracy to Take Away our Rights

Jon B. Eisenberg, a member of Michael Schiavo's legal team

Silent Witness: The Untold Story of Terri Schiavo's Death

Mark Fuhrman, a detective in the O.J.Simpson case who investigated Terri Schiavo's collapse.

Fighting for Dear Life: The Untold Story of Terri Schiavo and What it means for all of us, to be published this summer.

David C. Gibbs III, the Schindlers' lawyer, and Bob DeMoss

Terri's Story: The Court-Ordered Death of an American Woman

Diana Lynne, former reporter covering the case

The Case of Terri Schiavo: Ethics at the End of Life

Arthur L. Caplan, James J. McCartney, and Dominic A. Sisti, bioethicists. Foreword by Dr. Jay Wolfson, Terri Schiavo's court-appointed guardian ad litem.

ONE YEAR LATER: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The Schindlers

Robert and Mary Schindler recount their story at right-to-life rallies throughout the nation and in the book *A Life That Matters*, which they wrote with Terri's siblings. They are raising money for the Terri Schindler Schiavo Foundation Center for Health Care Ethics, which took in \$379,855 last year. The bulk was spent on legal fees, salaries, travel and conferences, but the Schindlers dream of building centers throughout the United States for the brain-injured.

George Felos

The stalwart advocate for a man maligned as a villain by Congress and the Vatican, Michael Schiavo's lawyer is taking a break from practicing law -- and paying the bills with national speaking engagements about his second high-profile right-to-die case. His first established the right to refuse unwanted medical treatment, including feeding tubes, in Florida. He has written about that 1990 case and plans to weigh in on Schiavo, too. His working title: *Beyond Schiavo: Searching for Death With Dignity*.

David C. Gibbs III

The Vatican, the president, Congress and Florida's governor all rallied to his cause, but the Schindlers' boyish-faced lawyer ultimately lost in the courts, which remains a grave disappointment. "We do not have justice in this country," Gibbs said. "We have a system of justice, and sometimes the system wins and justice does not prevail." He hopes, though, that the extraordinary case will force Americans to reconsider where we draw the line in deciding whose life has value. That's also the focus of his book, *Fighting for Dear Life*, to be released this summer.

Randall Terry

As the Schindlers' media coordinator, the anti-abortion radical vowed retribution against politicians who failed to save their daughter. Now Terry is delivering on that promise by trying to unseat state Sen. Jim King, R-Jacksonville, who refused to step into the Schiavo matter a second time. Saying King alienated

his base, Terry predicts victory. But he has raised only \$11,000 to King's \$159,000, a gap he attributes to spending the past year earning his second bachelor's degree, in communications, and studying Arabic.

Judge George W. Greer

Life is quieter these days for the probate judge who, amid death threats, hate mail and a request to leave his own church, repeatedly ruled Terri Schiavo would have chosen to die over a state of unawareness. He's contemplating a book and is certain of the answer he will give when he and Michael Schiavo speak -- on separate days -- at a Pennsylvania bioethics seminar on dying. His topic: Who Should Decide? Courts or Legislators? That's easy," Greer said. Courts. Do you want anarchy?"

Brother Paul O'Donnell

A year ago, the brown-robed Franciscan friar from Minnesota stood before the microphones and told the world, Terri Schiavo has passed away." He continues to serve as the Schindlers' spiritual adviser and accompanied the family to the Vatican, where they received the blessings of the Roman Catholic Church. But he's not optimistic about overturning laws that allow feeding tubes to be withdrawn. Unfortunately, the pro-euthanasia forces will use the Schiavo case to advance their agenda," O'Donnell said.

-- Maya Bell, Orlando Sentinel.

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