



It is with unbelievable sadness that we share the news of the death of Philip Hamilton, a beautiful 37-year-old soul. He died peacefully in his sleep on August 26, 2024 due to a sudden and unexpected health event, happy to have just moved to Los Angeles to live with his sister, brother-in-law, and precious niece Sloane.

Philip went through Poly, a 'lifer' in many senses of the word. He marched to his own beat and did not love following schedules or strict rules but challenged them respectfully. In high school, Philip worked part-time at an Armenian restaurant on Lake Avenue. That was the first real experience he had of witnessing economic disparity in the world. He shared his feelings about seeing young men his age working full time to support their families, and it seemed to turn his mind towards trying to understand those who were not as fortunate as he and his classmates.

After graduating from Poly in 2005, Philip decided he needed to explore the world rather than go straight to college. He moved to Cusco, Peru, where he

worked in an orphanage, made good friends, and bought a small piece of property on which he built a little stone house—not unlike one of his literary mentors, Henry David Thoreau. He stayed in Peru a year, then moved back to LA, where he worked as a hospice volunteer and wrote and performed stand-up comedy, having several gigs at Pasadena's *Ice House*.

Philip had a hilarious sense of humor, never cruel but observant and incredibly spot-on in its satirical bent. As ASB Vice-President at Poly, he put on such memorable assemblies that lower and middle school teachers would often come down to the high school to see them. As a result of his many antics and creative projects, Philip won the Aardvark Award for the student who best brings humor to the school.

Eventually, Philip finally decided it was time to learn more through academics and chose Warren Wilson College in Asheville, NC for its cooperative program and focus on service and community. During his time in college, Philip chose to spend a semester working in Calcutta, India, an experience that changed him forever. At his graduation, he was awarded with the highest service award accompanied by a beautiful tribute, of which these words are just a part:

*People who win awards are usually very good at something, but Philip Hamilton is not just good at something, he is good. His heart is warm and full of empathy, and his intense passion mirrors that of a revolutionary. Service has been an integral part of the formation Philip Hamilton's world view. I could stand here and tell you about all of the service Phil has done his semester in India, environmental work, community gardens, and housing-related programs. But where Phil has been and what he has done make up only a portion of why he is being recognized today.*

After graduating from Warren Wilson, Philip stayed in Asheville and attended culinary school because he thought it was important to have a skill to offer the world. He found his love of cooking at a well-known French restaurant, *Bouchon*. Although the owner wanted to make Phil head chef, his wander lust took him to New Orleans, the height of culinary and creative arts. In New Orleans, he worked with celebrity chefs,

choosing to be the only sous chef to stay and work alongside Chef Nina Compton at Compère Lapin when Covid began to send workers home, trying every creative effort to keep the restaurant alive and his colleagues employed.

When Covid shut down New Orleans, he moved to Iowa City, where he lived with his sister Kate and her husband, also named Philip. They had weekly Sunday dinners, dog walks, deep conversations, and a shared enjoyment of football and reality TV. He did political work for a local Democrat candidate, but it was when he was offered a job at the organization *Matthew 25* in Cedar Rapids that he found his true calling: feeding and caring for the vulnerable and the unhoused populations. He ran a “Pay It Forward” café called Groundswell, feeding anyone who couldn’t pay for a meal. He used this space to be in connection with his community and feed people – his expression of love. After three and a half years of creating a nurturing space for others, Philip took a brief leave of absence and traveled back to Peru and on to Morocco and Spain. He was hoping to work with World Central Kitchen, a perfect match for him, but the war in the Middle East became too problematic for his hire. He wanted to live internationally, and his recent travels gave him a sense of possibilities.

Finally, he decided that it was most important to be near family for a while in Los Angeles. He was excited to begin a new journey and continue his work with another non-profit to help those in need. He had just applied to work at *Homeboy Industries* and was reading the books of Father Boyle. His work to bring dignity, security, and hope to vulnerable people was just about to take a new turn. True to who he was, on the last day of his life, he spent time exploring downtown LA. That night in conversation with Kate and her husband, Philip talked about how he intentionally spoke with those experiencing homelessness that day, learning about their journeys and making sure they felt seen. He talked about how excited he was to get back into comedy writing and working with a nonprofit helping others.

Philip died with love and joy in his heart, surrounded by family in the house where he grew up in Altadena. Philip wore a tattoo written in the native Quechua language: Ñuqa yachayta munani. *I want to learn.* Philip was in the middle of his journey, but he had learned so much, understood more than most people his age. He will be so incredibly missed.

With the news of Philip’s passing, we’ve received many words of love and remembrance, and wanted to share some below in addition to pictures from the last few years. We encourage those of you who knew and loved Phil to donate in his memory to the Philip Hamilton fund at *Matthew 25*, so that he can continue to feed and support the vulnerable populations who loved him for his kindness.

*Donations in Philip's memory can be made to Matthew 25 by sending a check to Matthew 25, 201 3rd Ave SW, Cedar Rapids, IA 52404, or online at [matthew-25.org/donate](https://matthew-25.org/donate). Please put his name in the memo to ensure the gift is allocated to a special fund in his memory.*

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*August 24, 2024 – Baking Muffins in Altadena  
(Kate, Philip, and Sloane)*



*April 2023 – Iowa City  
(Philip, Kate, and Sloane)*



*November 2023 – Philip in Morocco*



*March 2023 – Iowa City (Philip and Sloane)*



*November 2020 – Thanksgiving in Iowa City*



*December 2019 – Huntington Gardens (Kate, Grace, and Philip)*



*July 2018, New Orleans (Grace and Philip)*



*August 2017, Minneapolis*



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Clint Twedt-Ball, the Executive Director of *Matthew 25*, sent us these words:

“Philip was the quintessential servant leader, always ready to jump in and help everyone he could. He arrived at Matthew 25 in November of 2020 after straight-line winds severely impacted many low-income houses and mobile homes. He was our first full-time volunteer coordinator and his job was to help the most devastated homeowners in the community. His work helped so many who were going through what some felt was the most challenging time in their lives.

When a position opened up as Director of Matthew 25's Groundswell Pay-It-Forward Cafe, Philip stepped in and used his culinary skills and compassion to create great food for the community. He especially loved making high quality meals for those who had no money. He was equally comfortable talking to those living on the streets as those in corner offices. In true Matthew 25 spirit, he often talked about the things he'd learned from the most financially destitute in the cafe and how much he appreciated them. In his all too short time at Matthew 25, Philip had an outsize impact, befriending many and helping them to feel seen and heard. It was a gift to spend time with Philip. We will miss his grace, compassion and justice-oriented love for all.”

Philip made life-long friends at Poly, and these excerpts capture better than we could, who Philip was:

“Like so many of us, I'm reeling from this news – and will be for quite some time. Phil's light burned so bright and lit up so many lives. He was irrepressible energy, and joy, and hilarity. You couldn't spend more than five minutes with Phil before your belly and your cheeks ached from laughing. He was also just really, really, really good. He made it his life's work to build better communities and to lift up those who felt, for whatever reason, low and sometimes undeserving. Most of us have jobs; Phil had a calling. And my god, was he fearless. Our Poly class, by and large, followed pretty conventional (you could say boring) paths. But never Phil. He and everyone he touched was bigger and better for it.” (Kevin Waite)

“My earliest memory of Phil was in kindergarten, when we were learning about the religions of all the kids in our class. When the teacher got to Phil and me, we looked at each other, puzzled. We decided then that we were American boys, and that was enough.

Later Phil took me to Fort Tejon, where they reenact the Civil War. For Phil, it wasn't enough to just hear stories of the war — Phil had to participate. We ran across the field screaming as they shot cannons. We spat at the feet of the confederates. Phil loved to learn and to teach, just not in a classroom. For Phil, learning was a full-body-and-mind experience that made you frightened and enlightened. Phil wasn't just a tactile-kinesthetic learner, he was a viscerally-psychedelic learner. Phil and I were always friends, but we didn't get super close again until high school. We were unlikely friends in many ways. Phil was impulsive, I was cautious. Phil was naughty, I was nerdy. I cared about my classes, but for Phil our weekly assembly was the only classroom that mattered, and he used it to educate the entire high school in what it meant to break convention and think for yourself. What bound Phil and I together was a shared desire to know the world as it really was and improve it starting from there. And bound we were — Phil and I were inseparable from the moment he picked me up in the morning blasting music that deafened our ears and ruined his speakers. With Phil, lunchtime wasn't about eating, it was about laughter, debate, and spectacle. No one will forget Phil reading — no, preaching — *The Origin of Species* from the hilltop for anyone who wanted to listen, and many who didn't.

Education with Phil didn't stop when the school day was over. Every Friday night was a night with Phil, and when you were with Phil, anything was possible. Phil seemed to know everyone our age in Pasadena, and he was invited everywhere. But with Phil it didn't even matter where you were, he would find a way to make it feel different. Driving down Lake, he was as likely to blast Syd Barrett-era Pink Floyd from his car for onlookers to hear as he was Snoop Dogg. Even hanging out in his basement was an opportunity to stretch our minds and imagine alternative pasts and futures. Phil was adamant that experiencing everything life has to offer was not something to put off, it was something to gorge yourself on at the nearest available opportunity.

For every moment that Phil overindulged, he was compelled to match that in what he gave back to others. No matter our Friday plans, nothing was more important to Phil than making it on time to a hike with his Mom and sister Kate bright and early on Saturday morning. Phil volunteered for his community more than anyone I've ever known. He introduced me to Hillside, where we mentored kids with difficult upbringings. Phil could connect with any kid, making them laugh with his made-up games and empathizing with them in their most vulnerable moments. From Pasadena to Peru to Iowa, the whole world was Phil's community, and he never stopped giving.

Phil taught us that life isn't just something to be lived — it's something to be experienced, questioned, and celebrated in all its messy, chaotic glory. Thank you Phil for everything you gave to me and to the world — you will never be forgotten.” (James Stout)

“I became friends with Phil when I started Poly in 7th grade (although he insisted it was 6th). We originally bonded over WW2 history, games, and movies. For our 8th grade project, Phil and I spent a week building a huge D-Day diorama that was eventually transported to Poly in the back of a pickup truck. During the day, we alternated between building the diorama and playing Axis and Allies. I designed and built the overall structure of the diorama, while Phil created individual scenes complete with elaborate stories about imagined soldiers. At night, we watched WW2 movies including a screening of *Saving Private Ryan* in Garland. In retrospect, I think Phil and I almost perfectly complemented each other on this project and in our friendship.

In high school, Phil and I often had the same free period and we would drive off-campus and explore Lake and Colorado. We frequently went to Del Taco where we would always order the exact same thing: myself one cheese quesadilla and Phil two fish filet sandwiches (all three items a la carte). I sometimes wonder whether anyone else has ever placed this order in the history of Del Taco and whether these orders in Del Taco's order history are a random unique concrete record of great times Phil and I spent together. I would never have gone on these off-campus trips myself and I was always a bit nervous about

the driving, music, and itinerary, however exploring Pasadena and having one-on-one conversations about a huge variety of topics with Phil was always a unique and mind-opening experience.

In college, James, Phil, and I spent one of the best summers of my life living together in Berkeley. I will never forget coming down to breakfast one day and Phil saying that he was leaving immediately to volunteer on a Navajo reservation in Arizona (James and I eventually convinced him to stay). That summer we had countless kitchen philosophical and political debates, went to a fire arts festival (meeting a retired Cadillac-driving kindred spirit to Phil), and went on a weekend wine tasting trip through Sonoma with two 40 year old Italians that Phil had met through his volunteering (one of the Italians would always say "of-course Phil-eeep" to Phil's proposals).

After college, I unfortunately spent less time with Phil due to where we were both living, however we still hung out around holidays or at weddings. Around Christmas one year, while Phil was working as a chef, we were hanging out at my parent's house and there was an unnecessarily huge platter of baby carrots in the fridge. Phil picked up the platter, held the platter in one hand like a waiter, and spent thirty minutes dramatically describing all the ways he would prepare the baby carrots (no one else really spoke the entire time besides laughing). At Sandy's wedding, Phil and I were sitting outside our hotel on a bench next to an automatic door that made a distinct screeching sound when it opened. Phil began to loudly mimic the sound in a guttural way that only Phil could and then rattled off a fast-paced litany of hilarious "that door sounds like a" comments.

Thank you Phil for your perspective, humor, and the completely unique and hilarious ideas and experiences we shared. I really respect your perspective and approach to life and will always ask myself what Phil would have thought or done." (Alex Caughron)

"In high school, if Phil was performing, I never ever wanted to miss it. He was a master character actor, a master guitarist, a master performance artist, and he was a beautiful human being. I was in awe of him. When you go on a Polytechnic class trip to some legendary hiking/camping site in California you have to sign a waiver. Phil Hamilton read those waivers carefully. As I recall there was at least one waiver that he absolutely refused to sign. It made me scratch my head at the time... but could it have been that he was the ONLY person who actually read these things?

I was lucky enough to have a good long week with Phil aboard a sailing ship on one of these trips. We were the only two from our particular group of friends on the boat. Phil and I weren't often one-on-one, so this trip was a unique time in our high school friendship. One night he and I were musing and riffing. We had come up with a character. A life coach whose core advice was "Ya gotta reach inside yourself and spill out your guts!" We threw out our voices rasping the words and contorted our bodies reaching in and viscerally demonstrating the philosophy of this well-meaning lunatic. We cried our eyes out laughing. I can't tell you how good it felt to make the funniest guy on the planet laugh that hard. Pure insane joy. It's a feeling I still carry with me.

Almost 20 years later at our friend Sandy's wedding I told him that I was thinking about writing a sketch for that character. His encouragement was gentle, assured, and just so kind in its nature. It felt good to have his blessing. The night of the wedding he and I chanced upon a man outside the hotel who was losing his pie and wine shop in a divorce (WHAT?! Yes, the world could be strange and magical with Phil around). The man let us into the shop! Phil and I had the run of the place for the whole evening, playing records, paying whatever felt right for as much pie and wine as our hearts desired. Feels like a dream to think of it.

Back during the sailing trip, Phil was looking over a cove on Catalina Island where sharks had come to breed. He looked at me and said, "We know the sharks come here to breed, but when they're not in the

cove, where do they go?" I looked at him, a little puzzled, shrugged, "I don't know. The rest of the ocean." Not satisfied by this guess at all, he asked again very intently, "But where do they go?" He really wanted to know, and seemed to believe the question could be answered if we thought hard enough. Phil really made a difference in my life. I will miss him tremendously, and am grateful for the many smiles and big laughs that his memory brings to my heart." (Thomas Anawalt)

"I am so shocked and heartbroken to hear this. I was actually talking about Phil yesterday — my colleagues were going to Compere Lapin and I was bragging I knew a chef there. I had reached out a few years ago when I moved to NOLA but the pandemic and kids got in the way and we never met up. But even in those brief messages — 5+ years since I had seen him at our tenth reunion— Phil was so enthusiastic and welcoming. As others have said, he was such a creative and inquisitive guy. We served on ASB together and as the only girl on the cabinet and a self-proclaimed nerd I always felt awkward and self-conscious in that group. But Phil, for all his frenetic energy, always made me feel welcome in his grand ideas, even ones I didn't always understand. Only Phil could raise three times the usual money to make the first dance a roaring twenties theme with a live band or put together a professional short for every assembly. We had a very nice conversation at our 10th reunion as I was in the thick of my PhD. He was asking me lots of great questions about bats and knew a ton already. Part of me was still feeling like the uncool teenager wondering why he even wanted to talk to me but that was just genuinely Phil — inquisitive and kind." (Hannah Frank)

Former Poly teacher Julie Davis, who knew Phil deeply, wrote:

"When he actually got to LA, I barely gave him time to set down his bags. We met for beers in Highland Park with his mom. Phil and I quickly dove into all the things we wanted to talk about. I asked him if he thought a cafe like Groundswell could work in a city like LA. Without hesitation, he said yes, and Phil's enthusiasm and confidence were infectious. We started dreaming about all the folks who could help us do this, and all the love we could spread together.

Then he brought us back to the present moment. With a glint in his eye and a wry smile, he shared the mundane fact that he was now living in his childhood bedroom. I asked how that felt for him. He said flatly, "I don't care about any of that stuff." And it was clear what he meant. He didn't care about success as defined by capitalism or achievement culture. He wasn't buying into rugged individualism or materialism or the nuclear family or any other myth that told him how to live.

Because Philip Hamilton knew how to live. And this is what I admire most about him.

Thoreau in Walden said that he "did not wish to live what was not life."

Phil lived what was life. He saw all the expectations and divisions and artifices that keep people at a distance from one another. That keep people feeling separate.

And he called bullshit on all of it. He set all that aside as "not life."

He lived what was life. And for him this meant recognizing every single person as someone precious and beloved and belonging. He embodied radical hospitality. He welcomed people. He saw them. He nourished them.

Thoreau also said this, and I'm paraphrasing: "I wanted to see what life had to teach me, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."



Dear God how I wish Phil was with us, but it is no small mercy to know, now that he has died, that he really lived.

And it is no small meaning to take from this tragedy to ask, 'Are we?'"