

I met Tim Atzei while in the first grade, at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School in Burbank. From that day, until his recent passing, I count myself lucky to have known Tim. When others were riding shoe-skates, nailed to a board, Tim had a scooter with ball bearing wheels and rubber tires... but without the joystick handle. I remember Tim flying down Scott Road, then making a sweeping turn up Irving Drive, all without brakes. Although there are no photos to prove it, Tim Atzei created “sidewalk surfing”.

Although he was not one of the “popular people” in high school, Tim knew and hung out with seemingly everyone. Speaking with him twice in the past few years, he had a story about almost anyone from the BHS Class of '66 that I could name. Always deferential to the feelings of others, Tim never had a bad word to say about any classmate, even if he knew an inside story.

In the 1960s, Burbank High had a thriving industrial arts curriculum. Tim Atzei had natural mechanical abilities and thrived in that environment. After graduation in 1966, he interviewed for work at Zero Manufacturing, in Burbank. When asked to demonstrate his abilities, Tim produced a set of tools from his shop class. When asked where he had gotten such tools, Tim said that he had made them himself. After hearing that, the interviewer excused himself, found the chief executive and both returned to review Tim’s work. On the spot, Tim received a job offer, starting work that day.

After a superior took credit for work that Tim had done, he left Zero Manufacturing and soon started work at Menasco Manufacturing, in Burbank. There, when no one else would take the risk to his career, Tim was ready. He mounted a towering gantry and made a cut to the main shaft of a Boeing 737 aircraft landing gear. Although we associate “making the cut” with sports, making the cut on a first production piece, as Tim did, risked hundreds of thousands of dollars and perhaps the reputation of his company. When Tim climbed down from the makeshift seat and reached the production floor, there were congratulations all around. By then, Tim Atzei was an unsung hero of the Southern California aerospace industry.

Apparently, people took Tim Atzei’s affable personality as being gullible or less intelligent than he was. When a manager took for some of Tim’s work, he again moved on, this time to a division of Hughes Aircraft. By then it was at the height of the space race and Hughes was involved everything from helicopter flight controls to “space age” electronics. One of the contracts required drilling a series of holes in a composite “blank” that was to become an electronic circuit board associated with a top-secret program.

In those days, before conventional machining gave way to “computer numerical controls” (CNC), it took a keen eye, mathematical skills and meticulous setup to make a part “to spec”. When no one could machine the required holes to less than one-ten-thousandth of an inch tolerance, Tim Atzei was giving the job. Again, defying the impossible, Tim created a “zero tolerance” circuit board. Thinking that it was a fluke, his manager asked him to make another. Soon, Tim was cranking out zero tolerance circuit boards like a one-man assembly line.

Soon after his success in machining and fabricating close-tolerance parts, a helicopter landed in a field adjacent to the plant. After landing, only one person exited the helicopter, making his way slowly into the manufacturing plant. The man wore a beard and had large-rimmed glasses. The following week, the same helicopter landed and a man with a hat and a cane came to visit. The following week, a man with bushy eyebrows and a wig exited the helicopter. Each time, the man entered the manufacturing plant, inspected Tim's work, said nothing to him and then departed. Despite the elaborate disguises, Tim deduced that the stranger was none other than Howard Hughes.

Soon thereafter, there were layoffs throughout Tim's department. One by one, the department shrank from twenty-five machinists to a dozen and then to only a few. One day, when Tim found himself alone in the department, he knew that he was next to go. Not wanting to face the ignominy of being the last to depart, Tim approached his supervisor, asking him what had happened to all of his coworkers. His supervisor told him that since Tim was doing the work of twenty-five people, they let the other twenty-four go.

That marked the end of Tim Atzei's time at Hughes. In the latter part of his career, Tim served as a mentor, teacher, trainer in several other companies within the aerospace industry. He also stayed in touch with old friends, from Burbank schools, his work career and his community. Over the past several years, Tim and I got together by telephone. His intellect, sincerity and good nature always came through. Many of his stories were about good times and happy days in Burbank, California.

On October 16, 2016, I last saw Tim Atzei. We met that night at the Castaway Restaurant in Burbank. The occasion was the Burbank High School Class of 1966 50th Reunion. At the time, Tim was not well, but as always, he was in good spirits. All of us who knew Tim Atzei shall miss him dearly.

- Jim McGillis, July 2017