

## Tribute to Julius Baker

by Jan Vinci

In my mind, Mr. Baker epitomized a true artist - encompassing not just his extraordinary musical persona, but also all human characteristics. By nurturing his unusual talent through diligent work and passionate dedication, he truly became one of the greatest flutists in the world with his extraordinary special *Baker* flute sound; but, at the same time, he always showed his very human side through multifaceted enthusiasm for photography, ham radio, working on his tractor and many other non-musical interests. As a student in his presence, I saw his self-assurance in being one of the premiere flutists of the century and his willingness to accept the numerous responsibilities that that entails; but, just as obvious to me, was his awareness of his more common human characteristics such as vulnerability, envy and a constant desire to be even better.

I would like to share one moment when Mr. Baker revealed how he innately combined his art with humanity. One sunny day, between classes at Juilliard, we took a walk on Eighth Avenue. Going to school, playing gigs and being a newly wed, I was having a difficult time keeping a steady practice schedule. I asked Mr. Baker how he felt when he took one day off from practicing. Without skipping a beat, he said, "When I do that, I feel like I never played the instrument." And then after a brief introspective pause he said, "But, you know what is funny about that? Invariably, the days that I felt I was not playing my best, that is when someone in the orchestra would tell me how great I sounded!" That revealed critical personal accountability, an unrelenting aspiration to play better and better, and, just as important, respect for his colleagues and audience. Mr. Baker's wisdom told him that the true beauty of one's playing is ultimately determined by the listener – even when our own ears and mind may deceive us. It was a very valuable lesson for me: When I play on stage, I should not reprimand myself if I miss one technical passage or play one note out of tune; but rather, I should be more concerned that my musical message is compelling and clear.

One more thing, after I graduated from school, Mr. Baker said, "Call me Julie!" For many years, I thought it was my southern up-bring that made me uncomfortable calling him anything but Mr. Baker. Over time I realized it was not that at all. Even though I knew well his human character, which would warrant me calling him Julie, my reverence and respect for his mastery and stature forever made him *Mr. Baker*.

