



George "Richard" Swartz

September 30, 1946 - July 28, 2019

June 9, 1970: A frantic mayday call from a medevac helicopter shot down over Vietnam came blasting over the radio.

A young Lake County pilot flying nearby heard the panicked cry for help. Richard Swartz turned to fly directly into bad weather and landed his helicopter amid heavy enemy fire. He helped the crew of the downed chopper scramble aboard and pulled his overloaded bird back into the stormy sky while the Viet Cong sprayed the craft with bullets.

He was 23.

Swartz rarely, if ever, talked about the daring rescue for which he was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross, the nation's highest aviation award, just two steps below the highest, the Medal of Honor.

Instead, that young Leesburg High School and Stetson University graduate went on to become a successful small businessman, a Tavares City Council member and a three-term member of the Lake County Commission. He married a vibrant Havana, Cuba, native who he feared at first would never even spare a word for a shy fellow like himself.

Known for his unwavering dedication to the public interest and his staunch slow-growth philosophy, Swartz died last Sunday after emergency heart bypass surgery.

His wife of 50 years, Gena Medrano Swartz, said she lost her "partner in life and my confidant." The community lost a man whose integrity was a constant signpost to those involved in politics and the growth industry.

He was 72.

Gena said her late husband would say his "days of glory" in basketball came when he played for the Leesburg High team as a member of the class of 1964.

When the school sold the old wood floor of the gym as a fundraiser, Gena bought Swartz the top of key from which he was known to toss long shots that neatly swished into the basket. Swartz held the school's free-throw record at the time, and the piece of the floor still sits atop the couple's wine cabinet in their Tavares home as a reminder.

Swartz met Gena at Stetson during his freshman year. He was treasurer of his fraternity Lambda Chi Alpha, and he played guard for the university's basketball team.

Fitness was a way of life for Swartz, who was a "devoted" stair stepper and rowing enthusiast, said Hal Turville, a longtime former Clermont mayor who said he and Swartz

were “kindred spirits” when it came to politics.

“The man was in wonderful shape,” Turville said.

“He was afraid of nothing. I always admired him because he did have the word “no” in his vocabulary, and he wasn’t afraid to be the only one,” Turville said of his votes on the commission. “He was willing to say, ‘This is not good for everybody.’”

“If every politician was Richard Swartz, nobody would ever have to go to a meeting or read a newspaper because they knew they were being taken care of like they thought they’d be when they voted for him.”

Over the years, political opponents would come to buy their bicycles at the Sun Cycle store in Tavares he and Gena owned and ran together, said Turville and longtime bicycle shop employee Egor Emory.

“They knew he sold good stuff and he was straight,” said Emory, who worked for Swartz for 16 years.

Emory said he sought the job at the bicycle shop because he wanted Swartz for a political mentor.

“I listened to him talk on the phone, and he always defined integrity. He never, ever did anything he didn’t believe in, wasn’t able to defend and had not researched thoroughly,” he said.

Now there’s a model that current politicians would be wise to adopt.

Swartz was on the Tavares council for six years, then served 12 years as a county commissioner. When he’d had all he could enjoy of that life in 2000, Lake County lost the only unchanging leader it has elected since the 1980s.

Swartz knew what he wanted — slow, quality growth — and he never wavered a quarter inch. He never benefited in any way from his votes, and he insisted on upping the quality with things such as sidewalks and lighting.

Swartz, a Republican, left office without having changed his integrity one iota. He was known for his rigid care for the environment, his watchdog attitude toward taxes and his sharp knowledge of the details of government — a knowledge that often exceeded that of staffers who specialized in planning.

Gena said they sold their three bicycle shops and began doing the things they had planned after so many years of work.

“We have gone on many travel adventures, some by ourselves, some with the most fabulous group of kindred souls sharing incredible journeys,” she wrote in a text.

The couple started a movie club and invited friends, including Sarah High, who was the budget and administrative services director for Lake County when Swartz was on the commission.

She said Swartz was “first class.”

“He was just a kind gentleman. He always made sure everybody around had their seat pulled out for them, and ‘Did you want coffee? Can I get a refill for you?’”

“When he was on the board, I thought he was the smartest, most diligent person because he did his homework. He knew what he was talking about in every situation.”

Retired Lake County Sheriff’s homicide detective Jack McDonald and Swartz each served a year with the Army’s 124th Helicopter Assault Company, nicknamed the “Devils and Demons” — McDonald in 1968 and Swartz in 1970, both based at the Phu Hiep airfield in Vietnam’s central highlands, north of Saigon.

Swartz downplayed his yearlong tour in Vietnam, saying that with the exception of the rescue he regularly flew a route nicknamed “the milk run” because it was so boring.

The two men and their wives discovered their connections and returned to Vietnam in 2014. They shared their stories and impressions of a dramatically changed country with Sentinel readers. The trip cemented an unexpected friendship between the couples and sparked more travel.

McDonald, a genuine Lake County character equally as political and as honest as Swartz, said he came to appreciate how the former commissioner treated those who had an outlook on politics that was decidedly different than his own — “always with respect.”

“Of course, he had his own opinion, and he’s going to tell it to you,” McDonald said.

No services or memorials have been scheduled for Swartz. Gena said close friends are helping her through “these sorrowful days.”

Services have been entrusted to Steverson Hamlin and Hilbish Funerals and Cremations.

Memories and condolences may be shared on the tribute wall.

Comments



“ I worked with Richard when he was on the Tavares City Council and I was the Tavares City Clerk. He was always the utmost gentleman, speaking his mind eloquently and with respect. I thoroughly enjoyed the time we worked together. Lake County has lost a true shining light. My thoughts and prayers go out to his family and many friends.

Mary Montez - August 02, 2019 at 03:34 PM



“ We are so sorry for your loss, Lucy Espey-Francis and Jerry Francis

Lucille Espey-Francis - August 02, 2019 at 08:03 AM



“ I worked with Richard many years ago when he and Gena purchased the old "Burger Shake" grill and adjacent convenience store in Tavares that ultimately became their bike shop. Richard was a pleasure to work with on that project. I was also a customer of his bike shop for many years. Richard was never too busy to take the time to speak about a variety of topics he enjoyed. I will miss him as I'm sure many will. My prayers to the family.

Greg Lewis

Greg Lewis - August 01, 2019 at 03:35 PM