



Roseville Little Canada Review

Tuesday, April 08, 2008

Kough remembered as fighter to the end

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Kough was a man of many interests. In addition to his political activities, he was a member of the Banjo Bandits and was also an elite senior athlete. Kough had countless medals earned with his skills as a diver, bowler and pool player.

After battling brain cancer valiantly for a year, Roseville City Council Member Tom Kough passed away March 30 at his home, surrounded by loved ones. He was 76.

Kough's life and political career were both unique. In his private life, he was a passionate banjo player and played with the group The Banjo Pickers. He was also a distinguished athlete well into his seventies, often bringing home medals from state and national senior athletic competitions. There seemed to be unspoken agreement that Kough could out-high dive, out-bowl and out pool-shoot men half his age, and Kough wasn't resting on his laurels. Prior to getting sick, he was planning to become the oldest senior diver in the World Master Games, with his sights set on the 2017 competition.

Kough was elected to the Roseville City Council in 2001 and 2005, but his political career began in Austin, Minn. in the 1980s, where he served as mayor. During his tenure, Kough's leadership skills were put to the test during a tumultuous 10-month strike at the city's Hormel plant. The strike sparked bitter divisions in the area and drew national attention, but Kough managed to handle it all with grace.

Coincidentally, Kough worked as a Hormel engineer for more than three decades.

Kough had not spent much time in hospitals prior to July, 2006, when he suffered a stroke that left his speech somewhat impaired and forced him to go through physical rehabilitation. However, he was soon back to his activities with the council and his diving and bowling competitions.

However, intermittent headaches and blurred vision signaled another problem, and in April 2007, he had a brain tumor removed. Though tests revealed he had a particularly aggressive type of cancer, Kough bounced back in characteristic fashion. "He was playing the banjo and dancing for other people at the hospital," wife Carol reported a few days after the operation. "He's determined to get well; nothing slows him down." He quickly returned to his active lifestyle, although at the time his physicians told him he had only months to live.



Tom Kough's great-granddaughter, Abby Wermager, 1, was one of the many family members present to remember her great-grand-dad on April 6.

Though doctors advised against it, he competed in last summer's Senior Olympics in Colorado, bringing home two gold medals in diving competitions. Through the fall and early winter, he still seemed fine.

"Around Christmas time there was no sign of the tumor," she added.

On Feb. 4 of this year, the couple learned the tumor had returned, and Kough was once again told time was short.

"They told him he had two months to live," Carol Kough explained, adding her husband chose to decline further treatment and instead enjoy his last days without medical visits.

For her part, Carol Kough was pleased to see her husband's fighting spirit help him survive longer than doctors expected.

"He beat the odds," she said, also noting his diagnosis never slowed her husband down. "He

was always on the go."

Over the last months, Kough delighted in spending time with the friends he's earned over the years, including former Sen. Mark Dayton. "Lots of people were visiting," Carol Kough said. "He was really having a lot of fun with that."

Thanks to his outgoing, sunny personality, Kough quickly made friends wherever he went, including vacations, Carol Kough recalled.

Through the years, the Koughs also hosted visiting politicians, foreign guests and even people stranded by the weather. Most were strangers, but Kough welcomed them all with open arms.

"He was really a people person," Carol Kough noted. "He made friends all over the world."

Her husband's political career, she added, should be remembered for one thing: people. It was, Carol Kough explained, her husband's driving force.

He had little time for long-winded policy debates or petty political fighting; rather he served because he delighted in people.

"He really cared about the people he represented; that's his biggest legacy," Carol Kough said. "He always said, 'I'm not working for me, I'm working for the people.'"

Not even illness and a dire diagnosis could slow Kough's desire to serve Roseville, a city he'd come to love.

"Even when he was sick, he wanted to keep working, he wanted to be in on how they picked his replacement," Carol Kough said.

Recently, Kough had sent a letter to his council colleagues, outlining his ideas about how he should be replaced when the time comes. Though no decision has been made, one is expected shortly.

Colleagues remember

passion for service

Retired Council Member Dean Maschka, who did not seek re-election when his term expired in 2006, recalled Kough as a fair-minded and friendly public servant.

"Tom was always a well-intended fellow," Maschka said. "Tom was just a good guy."

Though they sometimes differed on policy, Maschka noted Kough never took disagreement on the issues as a sign of unfriendliness.

"I don't think Tom ever held a grudge," he said.

Council Member Amy Ihlan and Kough often saw eye-to-eye on issues and she noted she was often inspired by his work ethic.

"It was a real honor to serve with him because he obviously cared about the people he served," Ihlan noted.

Kough's desire to continue his work in the face of a health crisis also impressed Ihlan.

"I think he really did as good a job as he could for as long as he could," she said.

Ihlan noted Kough will be remembered in the city for his advocacy of animals and his tireless work on the controversial Twin Lakes development plan that originally included big-box retail and government subsidies.

Ihlan explained Kough believed there was a better way to develop the former trucking-terminal site.

"Which is happening now with a business park," she added.

Council Member Dan Roe, the Council's newest member, having replaced Maschka, explained he tried to learn as much as he could from Kough.

"It was an educational experience," Roe said, adding he was particularly intrigued by Kough's service in two different communities.

Before his election to the Council, Roe was actively involved in city affairs, something he said Kough complimented him on.

"He was always encouraging me," Roe said.

Roe also admired Kough for treating everyone around him with respect while at the same time standing up for what he believed in.

"If he had a particular concern he didn't shy away from making his pitch," Roe said. "He was always business-like."

Like Ihlán, Roe was amazed to see Kough fight through his illness and continue embracing life.

"It was an inspiration. He had so much strength," Roe said. "I think it's a model for everyone."

Council Member Tammy Pust praised Kough for his ability to connect with residents and be an approachable representative of city government. "Tom was great at that," she said.

Pust also noted Kough attended as many city events as he could, not to advance a political agenda, but rather out of a desire to spend time with people.

"I thought that was one of his great strengths," Pust explained.

Pust worked closely with Kough recently on the city's lifetime pet license ordinance. The pair, both longtime dog lovers with pets named Buddy, had plenty to talk about.

"That was a bonding experience," Pust noted.

Pust also agreed that Kough had the rare ability to let disagreements during council meetings fade away as soon as the meeting was adjourned.

"He was never mean to me, never rude to me," Pust said. "He was always kind, always respectful. That's just the kind of guy he was; he lived his heart."

When he was on the winning side, he never gloated, and when he was on the losing side he never complained, Pust added.

"He was one of those guys who helped people get along," she said.

Over the last months, when Kough's health began to decline rapidly and he continued to attend meetings and advocate his beliefs, Pust said she'd go home and marvel to her children about Kough's strength and passion.

"He really did live every day he had and he was grateful for it," Pust noted.

She said she never heard Kough complain or wonder why the cancer had struck him. He was, in the end, Pust added, an example of what someone can accomplish when they have both immense inner strength and people who love him.

"He just did what he needed to do, every day," Pust said.

Mayor Craig Klausing said even though Kough had been ill for some time his death still came as a surprise because of the fortitude Kough had exhibited.

"It's very hard to believe Tom's gone," Klausing said.

Kough, Klausing said, will be remembered as a true man of the people.

"He was very plugged into residents and enjoyed people," he explained.

Like his colleagues, Klausing was impressed by Kough's ability to remain cordial during political debates.

"That was very much Tom; he did not carry grudges," Klausing noted.

While watching Kough battle his illness, Klausing marveled at Kough's spirit.

"It showed tremendous resolve and toughness on Tom's part," Klausing said.

"I never heard him complain. He didn't engage in self-pity."

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