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OBITUARY

Take a cue from Tom Kough: Don't hold back

By Dick Parker

Last night I finally watched "American Dream," a movie that won the Oscar for best documentary in 1990. I borrowed it from the library because it includes glimpses of Tom Kough, a working man/athlete/musician/politician who was a friend of mine. He died March 30.

Tom is remembered by Roseville residents as a City Council member, and by thousands of senior citizens and straw-hat-style jazz fans as the leader of the Banjo Bandits, a spirited ensemble that performed all over Minnesota and went to prison several times — to play for inmates — over the past 12 years.

"American Dream" chronicles the bitter Hormel strike of 1985-86. Watching it, I realized it felt like a memorial to Tom and also to John Carmichael, wise and effective head of the Newspaper Guild's Twin Cities local during much of my career at the Tribune and Star Tribune. John died April 19. We went on strike for a month in 1980, so I've had a taste of that experience.

Tom Kough went on strike for a year and a half and lost the Hormel job he'd had for 32 years. He also was mayor of Austin, caught between his fellow union members' passions and his responsibility to preserve civic order in his hometown when things really got ugly. He said Hormel fired him after he was seen, and recognized as mayor, wearing a "Cram Your Spam" sweatshirt. But after his death, people who remember those days praised Tom as a man who handled a no-win situation with courage and grace.

Growing up in Austin, Kough was a standout school athlete, particularly in diving. As a teenager and young adult he competed and performed in exhibitions including comedy



diving, which demands skill and guts in order to look funny. Tom approached all of his endeavors in the same way: He dove right in.

He and his wife, Carol, moved to the Twin Cities in 1987 and he found work as a steam engineer. After a few years, in the mid-1990s, he dove back into politics and ran for mayor in Roseville. Years earlier he had admired a Hormel co-worker's banjo playing, so he'd bought a banjo and learned a few basic chords. His Roseville campaign finance chairman, Al Sands, was a good piano player, and they incorporated music (of the "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby" genre) in his campaign.



The young Tom Kough in action.

basement dinners, and word of mouth quickly made the Bandits popular. The group's resume now includes gigs at the Mall of America; the Minnesota State Fair; several county fairs; Stillwater and Oak Park Heights state prisons and Waseca federal prison; casinos at Mahnomon, Minn., and Davenport, Iowa; a hockey arena in Superior, Wis.; the annual Rosefest parade in Roseville; parks, seniors' residences and nursing homes all over the Twin Cities area, and several appearances at an annual banjo festival in La Crosse, Wis.

Sometimes a Bandits job had emotionally rewarding moments for the musicians — as when nursing-home patients would perk up at the music. Tom, a Korean War veteran and a Democrat, was unabashedly patriotic — usually without getting political — and always included a medley of George M. Cohan and Woody Guthrie tunes. On one memorable gig the Bandits played for a boatload of young Marines and their families on a St. Croix River cruise before the Marines departed for Iraq on what was the second or third deployment for most of them. At about that time the Koughs' son, an Army National Guard sergeant from Austin, was serving a tour in Iraq escorting convoys.

He knew only three or four chords on the banjo, but Kough's engaging, outgoing personality and singing voice made him an excellent front man. And with his charm and utter lack of reticence, he had a knack for recruiting some of the area's best musicians who play the Bandits' style of jazz.

He was elected to the Roseville City Council in 2001 and 2005 and became known for his successful opposition to a proposed major redevelopment project because of its plans for big-box retail and its financing. Toward the end of his Council involvement he was the prime mover in enacting a lifetime-licensing ordinance for pets in Roseville. Whether they agreed with him or not, other Roseville political figures praised Tom's honesty and decency.

Kough lost the election, but in January 1996 he recruited two more banjo players to join him and Sands in a group to enter the St. Paul Winter Carnival talent contest. He called the quartet the Banjo Bandits. The Bandits made the finals. They didn't win, but at the event Tom recruited one of the contest's winners — Jack Frost, a bones player and drummer and the backbone of the group from then on.

Kough accepted invitations to perform at such events as church-



The early Banjo Bandits at the Mall of America — from left: Al Sands, Jack Frost, Tom Kough, Dick Parker, Stan Borgeson.

When opportunities arose, Kough took time out from politics and music to compete in senior-division athletic events around the country and overseas. In his 60s and 70s he was a world masters' 10-meter platform diving champion and a gold medalist in bowling, pool and horseshoes. It was characteristic that he kept trying to play his banjo while feeling the symptoms of a stroke during a concert at Wolfe Park in St. Louis Park in July 2006. He was rushed to a hospital after the band's finale, "The Saints," and found to have indeed suffered a stroke. He recovered substantially over the next nine months and rejoined the Bandits; although his speech was slurred, he could sing clearly. Then in April 2007 he was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

Characteristically again, after surgery to remove most of the tumor, Kough went against his doctors' advice and competed in the Senior Olympics last summer in Colorado. With his skull still healing, he won two gold medals in diving events.

About a year ago, not too long after his surgery, Tom Kough left me a phone message asking if I could come to the hospital and join him in playing some tunes for the nurses and fellow patients on his ward. He had his banjo under his bed, of course. Tom said he was determined to improve his playing and learn the chords all up and down the neck. He told me, on the answering machine, that the news from the surgeon "wasn't too good" and he may have anywhere from two months to two years left. But, he said, he'd had a good life and felt lucky that he'd been able to do all the things he had.

I'll say amen to that.