

Appreciation

Friends Raise a Glass to a Man of Honor

By Ellen Crosby
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The measure of a man's life, it is said, is not what he does or does not say about himself but what those who knew him say about him. Friends and family say that Wayne A. Swedenburg, founder and co-owner of Swedenburg Estate Vineyard in Middleburg, was a good man and a good friend. Swedenburg, 78, died last Sunday at his home, Valley View Farm, after a brief battle with prostate cancer.

"He was always there when you needed him," said Lew Parker, owner of Willowcroft Farm Vineyards on Mount Gilead Road.

Modest and self-effacing, Swedenburg quietly turned the limelight on others, particularly Juanita, his wife of more than 50 years. His friend Tom Casmay, owner of the shop Classic Wines in Great Falls, said Swedenburg was "the most honest man I have ever met."

Swedenburg wrote his own obituary, which, typically, omitted two State Department awards for outstanding and heroic service during hazardous duty assignments overseas.

Swedenburg was born in Salina, Kan., on May 8, 1926, beginning and ending his life on a farm. The years between were filled with service to his country, many in such hardship locations as Somalia, Bangladesh, Sierra Leone and Yemen. The values instilled in him growing up in heartland America -- hard work, integrity, self-sacrifice -- were the compass points of his life.

Swedenburg joined the U.S. Army Air Corps after graduating from high school in 1944 and was a B-29 crew member during World War II. In 1948, he joined the Foreign Service.

His first overseas assignment was in Jerusalem as Israel was being established. While there, he was wounded by mortar fire. His son, Marc, found the newspaper article his father kept about the incident. "It talked about him being wounded in Jerusalem in 1948," he said. "And about terrorists attacking the consulate."

"Wayne didn't go to garden spots," said Jack Bryant, a former State Department colleague. Bryant said Swedenburg always volunteered for the toughest assignments, seemingly thriving on them.

"We used to send him to the small isolated posts where he would be a mentor for the younger Foreign Service officers," Bryant said. "He made a real difference."

Swedenburg once said he had forgotten how many times he had come under sniper fire, but he did recall the one occasion he was under rocket fire and another when he was strafed by aircraft.

Bao N. Dang, vice president and treasurer of the Los Angeles Times-Washington Post News Service, said Swedenburg saved his life.

"I was working for him at the embassy in Laos in 1977 after the Communists took over," Dang said. "He brought my wife, my two children and me to a safe house by the Mekong River. We left at midnight for Thailand in a rowboat. Every year we have a picnic at his farm on the Fourth of July. I owe everything to him."

Swedenburg met his wife in 1950 when they were both working at the U.S. Legation in Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City. Gordon Murchie, executive director of the Virginia Wineries Association and a longtime friend, called their relationship "a true partnership."

"This is a couple that shared all interests and activities," Murchie said.

Marc Swedenburg, their only child, agreed. "There was a kinship between them. They didn't have to say much. Just one word, and they understood each other."

Though retirement was years away and there were more overseas posts, the Swedenburgs began searching for a place to settle when that day came.

"We talked about either a coffee plantation in Kenya, which was Wayne's idea, or a cattle ranch in Costa Rica, which was mine," Juanita Swedenburg said.

Instead, they came home to the United States and fell in love with Valley View Farm, a working farm since 1762 that was part of Lord Fairfax's holdings in Virginia. They opened the winery in 1988.

"They keep every inch of those 130 acres as manicured as if it was your quarter-acre lot in suburbia," said Tucker Withers, owner of Little River Inn in Aldie. "They do it all themselves."

"Wayne loved our farm," Juanita Swedenburg said. "After he retired, he was completely happy. He loved just sitting on the tractor and mowing the fields. And he loved selling wine. He was content to stay in the background and work the vineyard equipment. He was what you call a 'cellar rat.' "

Though well versed in his wines, Swedenburg often hankered for beer.

"I teased him that he kept a six-pack of the cheapest beer in his refrigerator," Withers said. "When I went fishing at his place, I'd bring him bottles of something more expensive."

Casmay got into the habit of giving Swedenburg a different beer from around the world each time Swedenburg dropped off a delivery at his store.

"He'd report back on all of them," Casmay said. "I took him two bottles shortly before he died and said I expected a report, not now, but later. I think he liked that."

Friends said they would most miss Swedenburg's small kindnesses, the thoughtful gestures. Unable to attend his 50th high school reunion, Swedenburg sent cases of wine from the vineyard, said a classmate, retired Rear Adm. Milton Schultz of Alexandria.

"He was very much of a romantic," Marc Swedenburg said. "Every year my daughter Jeana would look under the Christmas tree for a trademark pale blue box from The Fun Shop in Middleburg. It meant Grandpa had bought something kind of neat that was reflective of something she'd done. He was always listening to what you needed."

Swedenburg was cremated, and his ashes will be scattered on the banks of Little River at Valley View Farm. Friends celebrated his life, as he requested, with a small gathering at his home.

"We raised a glass to him," Parker said. "It was nice."