

'HE SPOKE, THEN HE DIED'

GILMANTON

At town meeting nine years ago, a voice of the elderly suffered a heart attack

By RAY DUCKLER

Monitor columnist

Stephen Goddard spoke for the elderly each year at Gilman on's town meeting, writing their questions down on a legal pad.

In fact, that's what he was doing right up until the day – almost the moment – he suffered a heart attack and died nine years ago. He was representing someone else, then he left residents at the town meeting shocked, giving them perspective, reminding them that library funding wasn't the most important issue of the day.

The meeting continued following a 20-minute delay, after a few hundred people had filed out of the packed gym at the Gilman ton School, then returned. Goddard was pronounced dead at the hospital.

He was 64. He left behind his wife, who was at the meeting, and three children, who were not.

By March 12, 2011, Goddard's mini Santa beard had become well known, as did his concern for others. He evolved into the mouthpiece for seniors, their own personal phone line to local government. He and his wife, Mary, had a system. She'd have that legal pad handy. She'd jot down questions seniors had phoned to their house a week before the meeting. They sought Goddard each year. He made them feel worthy.

"He was a very moral man," Mary said in a brief phone interview. "The seniors were afraid to get up at the microphone. This made it easier."

"They would go to him with their concerns and he would speak on their behalf," said Goddard's lone

SEE GODDARD A2



Stephen Goddard was a powerful voice at town meetings in Gilman ton.

Courtesy

In 2011, Gilman ton lost a great voice

daughter, Avantika Waleryszak, a hospice worker and yoga instructor who lives in Kittery, Maine “He was very impactful to the town.”

I was at the meeting, covering it for the *Monitor*. I recall the scramble in the back of the gym. A scramble that had no real form or structure or organization. Just a lot of scared people worried about their friend, getting close as they could, desperate to help.

Goddard’s death was the focus of a sidebar to the main town meeting story. The companion article named him, mentioned the heart attack, confirmed that he had died, and documented tears flowing from people like selectwoman Rachel Hatch, the individual who told me Goddard’s name.

I’m glad I chose to revisit him, and town meeting season seemed like the best time to do it.

I spoke to Waleryszak and the youngest of two sons, Jeff Goddard, an IT guy living in North Conway. They were thrilled to talk about their father. He grew up on a dairy farm in Vermont, owned a construction company in Minnesota, then returned to New England, settling in Gilmanton, planting roots.

He worked for an engineering company in Manchester, but Goddard knew upward mobility – to the rank of fullfledged engineer – was impossible without more school. So, he continued working full time and went back to school at age 38 to pursue his engineering degree. In about four years, the elder Goddard was an engineer. Jeff’s own professional foundation was cemented years earlier thanks to time he spent with his dad. They used to attend trade shows in Seabrook. They’d buy computer parts. Then they’d build a computer together.

“I’m so blessed to be where I am now because of the way my dad provided for

Family tragedy struck in 2005. One after another after another. A family member died from an overdose. Others died in a car wreck. Waleryszak was diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

By then, Goddard’s hard shell had softened a little.

“He had a bit of an angry streak,” Waleryszak said. “But he mellowed with age. He was my best friend. Eventually, I could confide in him and I knew he would hold what I said as sacred and he would not judge me for it.”

Around town, his children said homeless people sought him out, looked for his truck, aware that he was, as Jeff called him, “an easy mark. He was also the kind of guy who was frugal. He was generous, not in an institutional way, but more in a human, personal way.”

That was his trademark, seen each year at the town meeting. Goddard worked on the budget committee, and that position cemented his path to the annual event, even after he had stepped down. That’s where everyone saw that gentle side. That’s when neighbors, the older crowd, relied on him to make sure their voices were heard.

Mark Sisti – the wellknown attorney who defended Pam Smart a lifetime ago – has been the town meeting’s moderator for 16 years. That’s what he was doing the day Goddard died.

From his lectern up front, Sisti, like everyone else, was completely unaware of the nightmare unfolding. A takecharge, no-nonsense guy, he quickly realized that someone was sick and a voice of reason or calm or anything resembling leadership was needed. Fast.

“The first thing I thought of was that I wanted to clear that area,” Sisti said by phone this week. “They did that in a very orderly fashion. We had the fire department there, and there were trained EMTs, and the ambulance was positioned in its location. Everything

“They had a love affair their whole life,” Jeff said. “As dad got older, you’d see the love blossom, and it was not uncommon, once they moved to New Hampshire, for him to come home with flowers. He did things he had not done when he was younger.”

In time, Mary used the couple’s dog-breeding business to cope, stay busy, anything to alleviate at least a small part of the sadness. Or at least distract her. She had seven Welsh Corgi’s to care for, by herself.

“It took some time for her to find herself,” Jeff said. “Sometimes you lose motivation after a death like this, but she had these dogs and that gave her structure and a reason to get up at a regular time. There was a community of people she sold to and that helped her with social bonds.”

Town meetings, in fact, helped everyone with social bonds. Most notably, senior citizens. It got them out. It got them heard. That’s what Goddard was doing, right up until the end. He had suffered a heart attack 10 years prior, and as Waleryszak told me, “We knew he was living on borrowed time.”

He had time, though. To rise and speak up for someone who had something to say. It might have been something about funding the library. That was a spicy issue then.

Memories suggest that Goddard had stood and spoken, went to bat for his neighbor, frightfully close to his heart attack. They also suggest that the question, the words from someone else, were written down on that yellow legal pad.

“He said his piece and that was the last thing he commented on,” Sisti said.

“His public service was speaking for people who were uncomfortable themselves to do it,” Waleryszak. “He spoke, then he died.”

“His public service was speaking for people who were uncomfortable

us,” Jeff said. “He encouraged me and my brother to finish our education.”

Waleryszak said her father was forthright, which was why he asked his daughter, after she had earned her psychology degree, “What the hell are you going to do with that?”

She went back to school, got her Master’s degree, and now works with hospice patients as a social worker and has her own psychotherapist practice.

“He encouraged me and it paid off,” Waleryszak said. “He valued education, and I am so grateful for what he did. He was pivotal in my life.”

Then, she took it further.

was in place, and then you do what you have to do.”

Goddard fell to the floor from the third row of bleachers, in the back of the gym. People began waving furiously toward the main entrance, near the long table where the select board sat.

Emergency personnel administered CPR in a flash. A defibrillator was used, with everyone standing by, waiting, wondering, worrying.

A love affair died that day as well. A relationship that began in school, got serious later and never looked back. They went to the junior prom together, Mary told me. She wore his ring.

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AVANTIKA WALERYSZAK, daughter of Stephen Goddard

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Courtesy