

One year since loss of golf legend

Arnold Palmer's death left void in Latrobe

By Gene Collier
 Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Within the sacred catacombs of the campus monastery, inside the taprooms of the aging roadhouses along Route 30, up and down the sunny streets of Latrobe proper, a citizenry wrestles consciously or not with an emotional conundrum.

Grief is not a disease, comes the reassurance of psychological instruction, and thusly it has no cure, which is the hard part, the part not terribly reassuring at all.

On this very Sunday one year ago, Arnold Palmer died while awaiting heart surgery at UPMC Shadyside Hospital, an event still so fresh upon this community's soul the details haven't budged off the indelible.

"I was with him shortly before he died. The day he died — I had talked to him on the phone from here at 3:30," said Douglas Nowicki, the archabbot at St. Vincent

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Archabbey. "He sounded a little down. I asked if he'd like me to come and visit and he said he would. I got to Shadyside about 5:15 and spent almost an hour with him. His wife [Kit] and daughter Peggy were there. He was a little anxious about the surgery. I asked if he'd like a blessing and he said yes. We said The Lord's Prayer.

"A nurse came in to do an EKG. Kit walked me to the elevator. Ten minutes later he passed away."

Arnold Daniel Palmer, the man who'd brought golf to the masses and unfailing grace to a world that long admired its distinctive label "Made in Latrobe, Pa." was gone somewhat unexpectedly. Not seven months later, this pretty slice of Westmoreland County got gob smacked again with the death of Ambassador Dan Rooney, whose family connection to the area and especially to St. Vincent spanned more than a century, long before his Steelers moved their training camp there.

That double shot of heartache was served to a place still not fully free emotionally from the loss of fel-

low native son Mister Rogers near the turn of this century. Fred Rogers was a year ahead of Mr. Palmer at Latrobe High School, and would make a global mission of mitigating difficult emotions, especially in children. Emotions, ironically, just like this.

"It's about more than us. It's about Western Pennsylvania, about the whole Eastern part of the United States — it's gone through a tremendous transformation since the '60s, and these were both unique characters related to that transformation; both from working class families, Dan always a fighter for his causes, Arnie very much a model of the common man, and that was from growing up in Western Pennsylvania," said the archabbot.

"The loss is real, in part because what made them both such likeable figures was that they were accessible."

To whom then — or is it to what — must the community gain access today for its standing in the world? That's the kind of question you might think would put a damper on the annual banana split festival, or, more properly, The Great American Banana Split Celebration.

But you'd be wrong about that.

"We must have had 25 [thousand] or 30,000 people here for that in August," said Mayor Rosie Wolford, citing a figure three to four times the population of the Latrobe, where the banana split was invented in 1904. "I don't think a community ever recovers from the loss of icons like that, but no, I don't think we're diminished in any way. I almost think the opposite because while we feel their loss, we don't think their spirit is ever going to die here. It motivates us to carry on their legacy.

"We have a very robust and revitalized downtown centered around the art center and Mr. Rogers. I feel more inspired to give back because of them."

Ms. Wolford begins her second term as mayor in January after a 10-year stint on city council. Her father went to high school with Mr. Palmer and Mr. Rogers, and their contributions have a lot of

people focused on the central question.

"You don't replace people like them, but who is going to step up?" is the way the mayor put it. "Who are the players that are going to do the kinds of things those folks did for our community?"

That is the kind of question, meant to be inspirational, that can remain rhetorical for a long time. The Post-Gazette reported in July that Westmoreland County's population shrank more than that of any Pennsylvania county in this decade, thus the pool of potential icons isn't what it was in the generation that betag Palmer and Rooney and Rogers.

"That generation probably accomplished more than any generation. They took what was given or what they earned and they expanded it to help others," said Bruce Lauffer, the noted music director and conductor who grew up in Westmoreland County and raised four children, the youngest a sophomore at Latrobe High. "That's the thing we'll miss about the Palmers, the Rooneys, Roberto Clemente in Pittsburgh, people who couldn't wait to go out and help people. But look now at J.J. Watt [of the NFL's Houston Texans] and what he did for Houston after the hurricane [raise more than \$30 million]. Is that the next generation stepping up to make a difference?"

Maestro Lauffer is currently pulling together a program called "Love Letters," to be staged this fall at Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall and Museum, the music spanning part of three centuries from from the Civil War to the current conflicts. He was speaking inside Dino's Sports Lounge, the Route 30 landmark always thick with the aromas of hot wings and fresh popcorn. There, if you time it right, you can spot Ben Roethlisberger on certain summer nights.

Mr. Lauffer is hopeful by his musical nature, but he can't help but wonder as to the historical timing of these losses for Latrobe.

"Maybe I'm showing my age, I'm almost 60, but growing up in this area, you know, you knew your



neighbors — you knew who the leaders were and you looked up to them; now I'm not knocking technology, but this," he said, picking up his cell, "this is 24/7. People don't look up from it long enough to know their neighbors, so I don't know if you'll see people like that again, like the Rooneys, the Palmers. People like that cared about their town. Took pride in it. That's a huge difference."

So are we in a place here on the back end 2017 where everyone is too self-absorbed to have any applicable sense of community?

"I hope not," Mr. Lauffer said. "With the disasters we've seen recently, it looks like people have gone back to their loving, caring ways. It's kind of neat, but it's a shame it takes a disaster. It's almost like that's God's way of saying, 'Do I have your attention?'"

Loss is part of life, as we've come to know too well. Plenty of American idols fell the same year as Arnie: Prince, Muhammad Ali, John Glenn. But here in Latrobe, here in Dino's, they know who's missed most.

"Arnold would come in sit down with Kit," said Kathy Machak, who's

long worked behind this bar. "Vodka on the rocks and wings, and if anyone approached them, two nicer people you couldn't meet. Autographs? Pictures? He never said no."

In the end, this will not be so much Latrobe's loss as it is everyone's. The Rev. Paul Taylor, who's been at St. Vincent since he was a student in the late '80s, was the traveling cleric aboard the Rooney Expedition, when the extended family did its duplication of the Lewis & Clark excursion in 2003.

Not surprisingly, Father Taylor has spent much time in thought on the difficult transition away from both Dan and Arnie.

"They are larger-than-life figures, global personalities, yet they always maintained their roots in Western Pennsylvania humility," he said this past week. "Humility literally translated means 'close to the earth,' and it is no coincidence

that both of these men lived most of their lives on a golf course or football field, close to that earth. Each one had a memorable handshake that was offered generously and often. Each had a gift in the grip of that handshake, to be 100 percent present to the one they were with — ears, eyes, heart, soul. The autograph and the photo opportunity were great gifts, but the greater gift was the moment."

Now those moments can never be duplicated, which is the essential struggle around here, day to day, consciously or not.

"It's a blow," said the archabbot, "but I often think of Fred Rogers quoting Hemingway; it's in 'A Farewell To Arms,' and it goes, 'In the end, life breaks everyone. Some grow stronger in the broken places.'"

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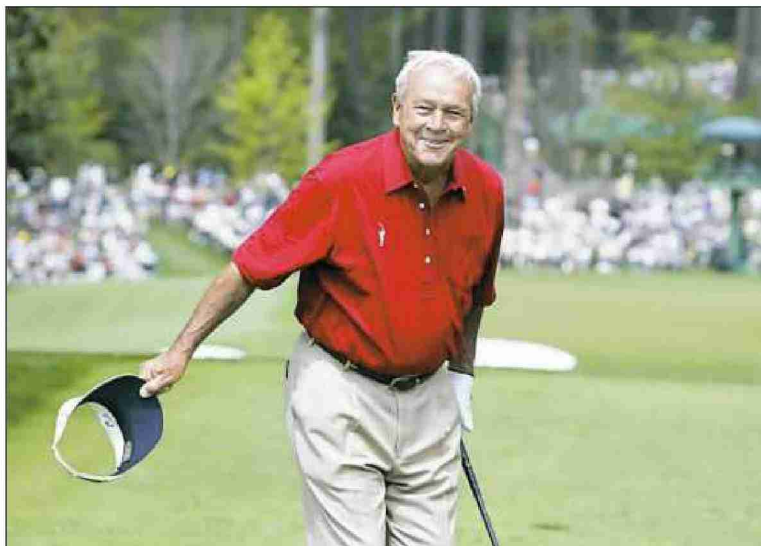
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Piper Bruce, 1, of Saxonburg, visits the statue of Arnold Palmer in Latrobe with her grandmother, Lori Perschke, not pictured.



Haley Nelson/Post-Gazette

Cheerleaders file out of the Arnold Palmer Field House at the Greater Latrobe Senior High School on Thursday in Latrobe.



Amy Sancetta/Associated Press

Arnold Palmer died Sept. 25, 2016, at UPMC Shadyside Hospital.



Haley Nelson/Post-Gazette

The St. Vincent Archabbey Basilica at St. Vincent College in Latrobe.