

Paul Flynn remembered

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PAUL FLYNN, the tough Yankee with a big heart who helped ignite USA Today as a career newspaper manager and later raised millions in Lee County to shore up people in need, has lost his long battle with disease.

Flynn was 73 when he died Thursday, Sept. 18, at Hope Hospice after an 18-month struggle. His wife Aline, his four grown daughters and his brother Phil Flynn were at his side, along with his parish priest.

Until poor health stood him down last year, Flynn had spent a decade putting wings on the Southwest Florida Community Foundation. The Foundation keeps its capital in situ and distributes interest income to people who need it. Flynn pushed that good-deed muscle money from \$13 million to about \$50 million by dint of kindness, compassion and the gift of gab, say those who knew him.

"The Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, a home for unwed mothers, scholarships — he helped hundreds of groups, and he made no distinction between groups of faith or work. He wanted justice for all of them," explained David Robinson, a Foundation board member, friend and former president of Edison State College.

"For a person so strong and important — and the more I got to know him, the more important I realized he was — the most remarkable thing about him was that he was not elitist," said Carolyn Rogers, a Foundation board member whom Flynn mentored.

He helped a Guatemalan immigrant who started her American life in poverty earn a scholarship to Dartmouth College; he made sure children who died of disease and whose families had no money were not buried merely in a public yard, without a celebration of their lives; he saw to it that a child stricken with a brain tumor facing a summer without air-conditioning at home would get air-conditioning, Rogers recalled.

Flynn's efforts and the Foundation's benefited the old, the young, the poor, the stricken, the mentally ill and those made bereft by hurricanes or other disasters. He infused such work with a sense of merriment.

Under his gifted hand the Foundation became something of "a legal Robin Hood," said Rogers. "He knew when to let others talk, and he knew how to locate the needs and he knew how to help."

Flynn exercised compassion with an Old Testament edge, practicing an instinctive and willful determination to enlist others in the cause of the needy because it was the right thing to do, recalled Robinson, who ascribed that behavior to the particular ethic of Irish Catholicism that Flynn embraced.

"He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God," recited Robinson, quoting a favorite verse from Micah (6:8).

"That, in my mind, describes him, it's what he did — that and the fact that he had one of the most genuine senses of



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— Daughter, Laureen Smith

humor, an Irish sense that could find humor in anything. And he could sing. He loved to sing, and we often sang together," added Robinson, whose own father was an Irish immigrant to Chicago. Even in the last day's of Flynn's life, the two sang, "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling."

"The word I use for Paul — he could shine."

Flynn began shining on Sept. 17, 1935, when he was born in Quincy, Mass., during the darkest days of the Great Depression. His parents suffered, and when his father, a shipyard worker, was later injured, his mother went to work as a telephone operator to support the family.

Flynn began working in newspapers as a teenage sportswriter for the Quincy Patriot Ledger. He was also a Boy Scout, before going on to Stonehill College. He remained energetically and actively devoted both to the Scouts and to Stonehill for the rest of his life.

After graduation, he joined the Army, serving four years before returning to newspapers.

More significantly for him, say his

friends, he met his wife Aline, with whom he shared a marriage of 47 years, four daughters and 12 grandchildren.

"The greatest gift he gave me and my sisters was his utter devotion to my mother," said daughter Laureen Flynn Smith. She and her twin sister, Lisa, were born 13 months after their oldest sister, Bonnie, and 17 months before their youngest sister, Bernadette.

Beginning in 1966 in Rochester, N.Y., when Flynn's star began to rise with the Gannett Corp., the family followed his newspaper career. They arrived in Lee County in 1977, and ultimately Flynn became president of USA Today (after he went to Washington, D.C., to help Allen Neuharth found it) and publisher of The News-Press and Pensacola Journal and News.

They were big corporate jobs, but Flynn never forgot the working people who built the industry under its managers, Laureen Flynn Smith recalls.

When she returned home on vacations from the University of Georgia, where she was studying to work with the deaf, her father would wake her at 3 a.m. and take her into The News-Press.

"We'd go back in the press room, which in those days was very, very loud," she recalled. "And many of them were deaf. So, using me to sign (American sign is the hand-made language of the deaf), he'd ask them about themselves and their families, and thank them. And outside, the guys sweeping the sidewalks or doing the maintenance, he'd say, 'I want to thank you for keeping this place so welcoming — your job is important to me, and I'm watching, and I thank you.'"

The same attitude came through in the newsroom when people did things well, recalled Betty Parker, the longtime political writer and analyst for The News-Press, who described Flynn's leadership style last year.

"He was charming and he could be generous. He gave you money when you won awards, and he made a big deal of it — it wasn't some little memo that appeared from nowhere on a bulletin board."

Ultimately, though, Flynn and Neuharth parted ways. Flynn once described Neuharth as "tough and driven," adding, "You end up with a love-hate thing, in a way."

Flynn was tough and driven, too, recalls Carolyn Rogers, but when push came to shove, he devoted his drive to his family.

"Once, he went in and told Al Neuharth, 'I'm sorry, my daughter's having surgery,'" Rogers recounted, of a story Flynn told her. "And Al said, 'Oh, well,' and expected him to keep working. But Paul told him he was leaving anyway. Finally Al backed down, and had a plane waiting to take him home to the family."

Eventually, after consulting and helping manage a family-owned newspaper in New Hampshire, Flynn returned to Fort Myers.

The long career journey was over, which proved a peerless blessing for people here, many say, since he did so much for them as a philanthropic leader.

Famously, he continued to take his wife, Aline, on weekly dates, devoting the same intense, individual attention to each of his daughters and his grandchildren, when he could.

Even when he fell gravely ill, he continued to shine his vital light on those near him, his daughter said — not only his family and friends, "but Dr. Lowell Hart and a staff of men and women at the Florida Cancer Center at Lee Memorial Hospital, who were so tender and personal toward us. Dad made sure they knew how grateful he was."

All that was part of the given heart, his reason for living, his family members say.

"My father stood for social justice," Laureen Smith said. "He stood for the little guy, the underdog. He was always looking to help his brother, his fellow man. Right to the end, he was looking out for his neighbor. He was our hero. Our tribute to him will be turning around, and saying, 'If Paul Flynn ever did something for you, you turn around and do it for somebody else — and you actually do it.'"

In lieu of flowers, the family asks any who wish to make donations to the Paul and Aline Flynn Scholarship Fund at the Southwest Florida Community Foundation. ■