

COLUMNIST

John Breunig (opinion): SilverSource honors Kalter, Fox and Berkman

John Breunig
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SilverSource Executive Director Kathleen Bordelon, left, and former Board Chair Jerome Berkman.
Contributed photo

Bordelon and I are chatting about SilverSource presenting posthumous honors for the first time at its annual golf outing and dinner at Rockrimmon Country Club in Stamford Sept. 15, when the Eagle Awards will salute longtime advocates Jerome Berkman, Alan Kalter and Gerald Fox, Jr. Bordelon, who is chief executive officer of the agency serving older adults, pauses to translate the award's name.

“An eagle is pretty rare in golf and these are pretty rare birds,” she says of the trio.

She immediately feels an impulse to self-edit.

“Wait, don’t print that, it’s really corny,” she says, her tone shifting into what amounts to a verbal cringe.

“Alan probably would have loved that,” I reassure her. “He could have worked with that.”

Kalter knew a thing or two about responding to jokes that range from gold to groan-worthy, having served as David Letterman’s late night announcer for two decades. Gags in the latter category only served as fuel for his volunteer side gigs serving as emcee for area charities.

He died last Oct. 4, less than a month after fulfilling his commitment to serve as auctioneer for SilverSource that Sept. 9, which turned out to be his final event of its kind. “He was determined to do it,” Bordelon says. “He was so great. He found the energy within his soul.”

His voice continues to serve SilverSource, hosting the agency’s voice mail in what Bordelon calls a “living memorial.”

“He could also have a wicked sense of humor. I would send him texts almost every day with pictures and funny things. His responses could be fiery, sweet or simple,” she says. “He was such a cool guy.”

In some ways, she still can’t get Berkman’s voice out of her head either. He died Oct. 20, just a few weeks after Kalter (“that was a whammy,” she says).

Bordelon says Berkman “was like my private book club,” making recommendations she came to trust. She’s still listening to the Audible version of Arthur Herman’s “Freedom’s Forge.”

“I don’t want it to end because it was the last book he recommended,” she says. “I guess I’m pretty sentimental.”

She shares similar sentiments about Fox, declaring “he was my rock.” Fox, who died in 2020, also blended resolve with humor in his efforts to help seniors, leveraging his experience as an attorney and probate judge. After Bordelon shared her frustrations over dealings with the Westchester County courts in the wake of her mother’s death, Fox responded, “don’t feel bad. They only talk to God.”

She credits him as a cornerstone for SilverSource during a time the agency was going through profound transitions. That included hiring her in 2013.

“He interviewed me,” she recalls. “He asked me all the tough questions.”

Bordelon boasts a downright intimidating resume, having held leadership positions with Person to Person, the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, Readers Digest and others. The interview question that stuck with her was “Have you ever run a golf tournament?”

She had not, though Fox and Co. apparently appreciated her response that she had planned several large events. Bordelon still doesn’t play golf, but the tournament remains so popular that this year’s edition is already sold out. Tickets for the dinner are still available.

While the Eagle Award is new, the event will carry on the tradition of honoring current advocates. This year’s honorees are John Barnes and Greg Caggainello. They carry on a chain of community support that is both invisible and forged by generations. A glimpse at the Advocate’s coverage of the 1908 origins of SilverSource (then the Stamford Home for the Aged) reveals names of “incorporators,” some of which remain familiar for their use on street signs.

Their objective was “to maintain, in the town of Stamford, an institution providing for aged and infirm persons a comfortable residence with board, clothing, religious privileges, medical and other necessary attendance ...”

It is 114 years later, and that chain of advocates can’t afford to become slack.

“Ageism is alive and well,” Bordelon says.

There have been other weak links. Stamford’s Commission on Aging perished of neglect. Members stopped meeting. The website wasn’t updated after 2013. There are more older adults (the preferred term) in Stamford than children in the public schools. Imagine the Board of Education vanishing.

Bordelon sounds Lettermanesque herself when she cracks, “We have a Shellfish Commission for chrissakes, but we don’t have a Commission on Aging.” Then she reverts to CEO form. “Not that we don’t need a Shellfish Commission ...”

The need felt by some seniors, though, will never be extinguished. People who live on fixed incomes are making hard choices at the checkout counter as supermarket receipts balloon. SilverSource clients are still required to wear masks, which should be all everyone else should need to know before barking about personal freedoms.

Fortunately, weak links can be mended. Though it has yet to be publicly announced, Stamford Mayor Caroline Simmons is convening the Mayor’s Advisory Council on Older Adults “to advise, advocate and make recommendations to the Mayor and Board of Representatives on behalf of Stamford’s senior population to improve their quality of life with regard to their physical, financial, social, and emotional needs and challenges, including housing, transportation, food insecurity, safe neighborhoods and mental health.”

The first meeting is Monday, and the panel will be co-chaired by Bordelon and Stamford Senior Center Executive Director Chris Crain.

The SilverSource golf tournament and dinner will be held a few days later. Since I feel a twinge of guilt at betraying Bordelon, I run her “rare bird” line by Kalter’s widow, Peggy, who confirmed he “absolutely” would have approved.

She plays with the pun herself, imagining the trio of honorees/golfers gazing down at Rockrimmon from heaven and boasting “hey, I got an Eagle today.”

Then she explains why, among all the charities Kalter supported, he asked that memorial donations be made after his death to SilverSource.

“He had such respect for Kathleen and how SilverSource was run,” Peggy said. “He knew the money that was donated was going to the people who needed help.”

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