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Sonia Gray: Lester Pritchard important to Galesburg

By SONIA GRAY

Guest Opinion

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Maybe some of you are not aware that Lester T. Pritchard was the fourth generation of the Custer-Pritchard family that owned and operated The Register Mail. Lester T. Pritchard's grandfather, Omer N. Custer formed The Register-Mail, turned it over to his daughter, Ethel (Custer) Pritchard, and Bill Pritchard, Lester was president of Galesburg Printing and Publishing Co. and later John Pritchard became publisher. The Pritchards also owned The Galesburg Broadcasting Company with Lester as president. Galesburg Broadcasting Co. owned and operated WGIL/WAAG with Lester as president.

During his time as president of these two companies, Lester started advocating independence for the handicapped. During this time there was no Section 504 in place and he sat in on the committee hearing for Section 504. During Lester's time in Galesburg, the City Council together with some members of the Chamber of Commerce spent the day in wheelchairs. Spending a day in downtown Galesburg in a wheelchair in 1977 was quite a harrowing experience. They had to try and get up and down curbs (no cut outs were in place at that time), juggle getting in a door of a business that had no handicapped door, make phone calls from a pay phone booth without accessible doorways and fit wheelchairs in restaurants.

Lester did this every day with assistance except when he used driveways for his ramps. Every day he tried to get into restaurants and businesses on Main Street that were not accessible.

Lester got a group of parents who had handicapped children together to voice concerns over inaccessible buildings and classrooms for their children. Eventually they were able to get an elevator in the high school together with classroom modifications.

When Lester brought a group of handicapped citizens, the City Council made provisions and moved the chambers to the first floor for a special meeting to hear concerns of citizens who wanted to help Lester start a door-to-door van service for the handicapped. The Handi Van Service began with Lester giving the first van to the city.

He contributed his time and effort in helping his family make The Register Mail one of the best newspapers in the Midwest and WGIL/WAAG one of the best radio stations in this area. When he moved to the Urbana Champaign area he continued the same zeal to help handicapped people to be a part of the community. He served on many state and federal committees and councils.

When I called the editor of the Register Mail, I asked why Lester Pritchard's obituary was on the back page of the newspaper. He answered "well he has been gone from this area for 30 years." He may have been gone from Galesburg for 30 years but don't believe that he was forgotten from the hearts of the many citizens who enjoy the privilege of accessible buildings, curb cutouts and accessible parking in Galesburg.

We all owe Lester Pritchard a debt of gratitude for standing up and making his voice heard. May he rest in peace!

Editor's Note: A story about Lester Pritchard was published on Page A5. His paid obituary was published with other obituaries on Page A11.

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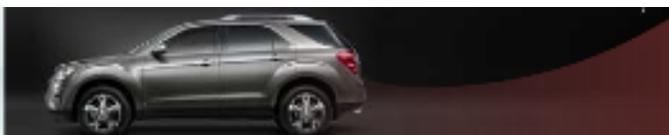
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