

TRIBUTE

Sam Mackenzie, CGCS, Olympia Fields CC

Farewell to a Friend

The Midwest Association of Golf Course Superintendents lost a twenty-eight year member on January 16th of this year. Gary Galecki was the longtime Golf Course Superintendent at Ridge Country Club on Chicago's south side. More importantly, he was a fine husband, father and brother to his family as well as good friend to the many people who knew him.

Gary lived his entire life in La Grange, Illinois. He was the fifth of six children to Ed and Joan Galecki. His father was a carpenter and his mother worked as an administrative clerk. Together they raised their family in a house his father built on Brianard Avenue, just across the street from La Grange Country Club (LCC). For most of his life Gary didn't stray far from that address; in fact, on the day he passed away, he lived just two blocks east of his childhood home.

While growing up, Gary got his first taste of golf by caddying and then working on the grounds crew at LCC. At age 15, during the 1974 U.S. Women's Open held at LCC, Gary had the opportunity to caddy for Sandra Palmer. He enjoyed the experience but described it as "a tough loop", as Palmer did not win.

Gary attended St. Cletus and then Lyons Township High School (LT). By many accounts he was an excellent athlete playing both baseball and golf.

A life long friend, Mike Scheer remembered Gary, "as a four year letterman in golf at LT, always ranking among the top three on the team." In college Gary was a walk on for the Utah State golf team.

When college in Utah wasn't the answer, he came home and started working at Timber Trails Golf Course for Don Hoffman. One of his first jobs was night waterman. He learned golf maintenance from the ground up and by the time he left he was one of Don's assistants. He went on to attend Rutgers University and graduated from their turf program in 1983.

While at Timber Trails, Gary met his wife of nearly 30 years, Grace. She worked as a starter at the club. They have two children, Josh and Jenna. Both of them were excellent



athletes in their own right - Joshua excelled in baseball, football and basketball, and Jenna was an excellent gymnast. Like most of us, Gary was proud and supportive of his children's endeavors. Whenever he and I would talk, our conversations eventually centered on the kids. He was so proud of their accomplishments on and off their respective fields of play.

Gary's pride was on full display this past fall when Josh and Glen (Gary's older brother), ran in the Chicago Marathon. They ran to raise money for cancer research and to support Gary. Even on a cold October day and as sick as he was, Gary was determined to be there to catch a glimpse of his son and brother crossing the finish line. The story has it that the 27 year old Josh had a slightly longer day than his 61-year old uncle. Glen said "Josh started the race in the group in front of me but somewhere along the way I passed him and I put my name on the finish line first."

However, Glen told me that he spent the rest of the day recovering in his hotel room with Gary while Josh recovered from the race in a bar with his girlfriend. Sounds like Josh may have had the last laugh. At any rate, it was a great day for the Galecki's.

In the spring of 1983 Gary became Bob Maibusch's assistant and spent five years at the Hinsdale Golf Club. According to Bob, Gary started just a few months after he did and "they learned the course together, on the job." Bob added, "Gary worked his ass off in those early years and he was one of my best assistants."

In 1988 Ridge Country Club hired Gary as their Golf Course Superintendent. It was the start of a 21-year run at the south side club. The club sits at 103rd and California on only 97 acres



Josh, Grace, Gary and Jenna Galecki.

and plays just 6224 yards. Gary spent those years shaping the grounds into one of the most beautifully manicured and wonderfully challenging golf courses you might play. My recollection is that he rebuilt the bunkers twice, built countless tees, created a short game area and added a new irrigation system. His last Grounds Chairman Joe Ryan added, "no one has ever done more with 100 acres than Gary." Gary's flowers became legendary. He had a tremendous ability to combine annuals and perennials to create some of the most stunningly beautiful flower and landscape beds.

While it was difficult for him to get around during the last year Gary never stopped going to work. The members at Ridge respected and cared for Gary a great deal. Mr. Ryan explained, "In my 24 years at Ridge, there was no doubt in my mind whose golf course it really was. It wasn't the member's course, it was Gary's. During my two years as President I never questioned his decisions, he was our expert."

I met Gary at Butler National in the spring of 1982 where we both were doing our internships for Oscar Miles. His easy going personality and quiet sense of humor were easy to like. We became friends almost immediately. It's funny how life takes

you down a path and something seemingly as small as a friendship can have such a profound impact on your life. Eventually he and Grace would introduce me to Grace's sister Sally, whom I would marry and have two sons with. That probably wouldn't have happened had I not met Gary.

Over a lifetime we meet all sorts of folks, some good and some not so good. Gary truly was one of the good ones. As most who knew him well would confirm, he was a kind and generous person who gave his friendship easily. I've always felt lucky to have counted him as one of my friends. I know my life is made better by knowing him and hopefully in some small measure I returned the same in kind.

During the coming months, especially as we get into the golf season, I will think of him when something out of the ordinary pops up. He was a close confidant and we would call each other with our problems. He won't be there this time to listen to me whine about a dilemma on the course or complain about the weather. I take some comfort in knowing he doesn't have to worry about such mundane things anymore, but I also know that will be the day I will truly miss him the most. **-OC**



Gary and his crew from Ridge CC.



*Gary, far left in his early days at Hinsdale Golf Club.
Below, Gary's famed flowers outside Ridge CC.*

