

News Obituaries

MICHAEL HUGH DUFALLA | June 4, 1942 - Oct. 22, 2018

PennDOT district engineer took pride in helping people

By Janice Crompton
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Michael Dufalla's life was the greatest of American success stories.

He grew up in a small coal patch in Washington County, in a home with no running water. His Slovak immigrant father worked in the nearby coal mine, and Mr. Dufalla spoke no English until first grade.

But Mr. Dufalla, who had multiple college degrees, owned an engineering business and oversaw a four-county region as a district engineer for the state Department of Transportation, was "a relentless worker," said his daughter, Nicholle Dufalla, of South Strabane.

"He was stubborn and he would grind," Ms. Dufalla said.

Mr. Dufalla, 76, died Monday at his South Strabane home from a rare form of gastric cancer that he had been fighting for about a year.

The 1960 graduate of Bethlehem-Center High School grew up in Besco, a small hamlet on Ten Mile Creek in East Bethlehem.

Mr. Dufalla earned an associate degree in engineering from Penn State in 1962, before completing a bachelor's degree in civil engineering at the University of Pittsburgh five years later.

He went on to obtain master's degrees in civil engineering, public works and public administration from Pitt over the next 30 years, where he also served as a board member of the Civil Engineering Department in the university's Swanson School of Engineering.

"He had that mentality of a first-generation American. He was super adamant about getting an education," said his daughter, who also became a civil engineer.

Early in his career, Mr. Dufalla worked at several local engineering firms before a job interview in the 1980s with Engelhardt-Power and Associates in Washington.

When asked the typical interview question about where he saw himself in five years, Mr. Dufalla responded "I will own this company," his daughter said.

"And he did own the company five years later," she said.

By 1993, Mr. Dufalla left the private sector to accept a job offer from PennDOT to lead its District 12 operations, which include Washington, Westmoreland, Greene and Fayette counties.

He oversaw 800 employees and a \$350 million annual budget, but Mr. Dufalla was up to the task, said Chuck Thompson, who worked alongside him for 10 years.

"He was a great guy to work with," said Mr. Thompson, a retired engineer who lives in Indian Land, S.C. "There was nothing you couldn't achieve in a design challenge, winter storm maintenance or a hideous policy. Mike always knew you could do it, and it's pretty hard not to love a guy who didn't let barriers stand in the way of doing things."

Mr. Dufalla ushered in several innovative projects during his 11-year tenure at PennDOT, including the "single-point urban interchange" at the intersection of routes 22 and 66 in Delmont, Westmoreland County.

"It was the first time we'd ever seen a design like that in Pennsylvania," Mr. Thompson recalled. "It was a really unique project."

Mr. Dufalla often preferred file employees and cared about them and their families, which endeared him all the more to those he worked with, Mr. Thompson said.

"He related to everybody — he wasn't a guy sitting in an office," Mr. Thompson said. "He would hang out with the people who were doing the real work."

An avid outdoorsman, Mr. Dufalla also worked to steer funding and grants toward completion of the Montour Trail, his friend said.

"That wasn't an easy task because it also required local and federal funding," Mr. Thompson said. "It was largely thanks to Mike's direction that the trail continued to grow."

In more recent years, Mr. Dufalla assisted with the planning of a waterway trail along Ten Mile Creek, where he played as a child.

"It was very sentimental for him," his daughter said. "We used to go canoeing as a family."

Mr. Dufalla also served as senior vice president of Mackin Engineering and

worked as a consulting engineer for many local municipalities and government organizations over the years.

He was recognized with a Person of the Year Award from the American Society of Engineers in 2002 and with a Distinguished Alumni Award from the Swanson School of Engineering several years later.

But it was his work in helping people, whether it was through a new bridge, roadway or other design, that made her father most proud, Ms. Dufalla said.

He even built and designed the family's brick home on 15 acres.

"He would point out projects that he did whenever we were out driving around," she remembered. "He took so much pride in even something small, like a culvert, because it would drain better. Infrastructure was important to him to make people's lives better."

In July 1985, he married Penny Suwak, who he met when she came to a Chartiers municipal meeting to request a building permit for an addition to their family store.

"He actually denied the

permit so that he could get to know her better and to keep her coming back," Ms. Dufalla said. "They would always laugh about it later."

Despite his successful career, her father wasn't a workaholic, Ms. Dufalla said. He and his wife saved their money to ensure their four daughters would receive a proper education.

"We didn't live lavishly," she said. "He always stressed education. That was super important to him. He was always telling us to go, go, go get those A's."

And her father had a favorite expression that he often repeated to his children: "Nevzdávaj sa" — "never give up" — in Slovak.

Along with his wife and daughter, Mr. Dufalla is survived by daughters Tamara Brogan, of Sanford, N.C., Michele Dufalla, of Cleveland and Jacqueline Dufalla, of Budapest, Hungary; brother Kenneth Dufalla, of Clarksville, Greene County; and five grandchildren.

At Mr. Dufalla's request, funeral services will be private.

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