

Al Neuharth's 'free spirit' celebrated at USD Friday

By Travis Gulbrandson
travis.gulbrandson@plaintalk.net

Spotlight On

UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH DAKOTA

Al Neuharth is remembered around the world as a legend in the field of journalism for his founding of the USA Today among other achievements.

Those who gathered to celebrate his life on Friday morning were reminded of something Neuharth always remembered throughout his life and career – his roots in South Dakota.

Colleagues, friends and acquaintances gathered at Aalfs Auditorium on the University of South Dakota campus to pay tribute to the Eureka native, who died April 19 at his home in Florida.

"I did OK as a newspaper guy in Miami, and then nationwide after that, but I never lost my love for the sacred soil of South Dakota," Neuharth himself said via a pre-recorded video message.

Those who knew and worked with him confirm this.

Jack Marsh, president of the Al Neuharth Media Center, described Neuharth as being "South Dakota through and through."

"His first directive to me as a new employee was to create reasons for him and his young family to leave Florida and visit South Dakota for what he called 'reality checks,'" Marsh said.

Neuharth often returned to the state a half-dozen times each year, often bringing along family members.

"In South Dakota, we were familiar with a relaxed and unpretentious Al Neuharth," Marsh said. "He always insisted on

taking the wheel, pumping his own gas and setting his own pace. When he wasn't in a hurry, he got off the Interstate and took the back roads. As he surveyed the vast, open landscapes and the spectacular prairie sky, he regaled the children and other passengers with stories about growing up in the '30s, '40s and early '50s. ...

"It's like a breath of fresh air here," Al once told a television audience. "South Dakotans are the real thing. They can tell when the emperor has no clothes on. South Dakotans behave with each other, know each other and care for each other."

Sen. John Thune agreed, adding, "Al was from a different generation than I was, but I think he never forgot where he was from ... and that matters. And, it always came across.

"With Al, what you saw was what you got," Thune said. "He was authentic to the core. There was nothing phony about him, and I always appreciated that."

USD president James Abbott said Neuharth's visits to USD – often over Dakota Days – served as "a subtle and constant reminder to our students that they, too, could dream dreams and make them come true."

Born in Eureka in 1924, Neuharth's family moved to Alpena after the death of his father in 1926.

Like many of his generation, Neuharth served during World War II, enlisting in the Army and serving both in Europe and the Pacific.

"I always believed that a lot of his determination, his grit, was shaped by (the war)," said former NBC new anchor and USD alum Tom Brokaw said in a video statement.

Neuharth was among the many interviewees for Brokaw's book, "The Greatest Generation."

During the interview, Neuharth was "uncharacteristically modest," Brokaw said.

"Trying to put it all in context, he said, 'Sure I won the Bronze Star, but so did a lot of other people. I just don't like to talk about those days.'"

Upon his return home, Neuharth attended USD on the GI Bill to study journalism. After a disastrous attempt at broadcasting a Coyote football game over the radio, he switched his emphasis to print.

He never looked back, joining the Associated Press in Sioux Falls, and co-founding the weekly paper SoDak Sports in 1952. That publication folded less than two years later, and in Neuharth's

words he "ran away from home" to Florida to work for the Miami Herald.

Neuharth later worked for Gannett and went on to found Florida Today in 1966, and the USA Today in 1982, followed by the Freedom Forum and the Newseum in 1991 and 1997, respectively.

With a gift from the Freedom Forum, the Al Neuharth Media Center was officially opened on the USD campus in 2003. An endowment from the Freedom Forum also assured the independence of The Volante, the campus newspaper.

"Financial support and media attention paled in comparison to Al's most important gift to USD – his constant interaction with our students," Abbott said. "Year after year he patiently answered questions, often the same ones as the year before. ...

"He enjoyed our students, and they in turn loved him."

Neuharth also was instrumental in the founding of the Native American Journalists Association, the Crazy Horse Journalism Workshop and the Native American Journalism Institute.

"I know that there are so many of us who don't know where they would be today had it not been for Al and the innovative programs he established," said Mary Hudetz, vice president of the Native American Journalists Association.

His work with Native American journalists was another reflection of Neuharth's devotion to his roots, Hudetz said.

"In our industry, in our country, so often the first Americans are forgotten. But not with Al," she said,



People who gathered Friday morning in Aalfs Auditorium on the USD campus to celebrate the life of newspaper legend and 1950 USD alumnus Al Neuharth were greeted, at the program's opening, by a video message from Neuharth himself. He posthumously addressed audience members with a video segment taped before his death. Neuharth, the founder of SoDak Sports, USA TODAY, Freedom Forum and the Newseum, and died at his Cocoa Beach, FL, home on April 19. He was 89.

(Photo by David Lias)

adding that Neuharth was both a mentor and a friend to many.

"(Because of his support) our members and members to come have never been denied the support to tell the stories of their own people," Hudetz said. "When the founder of the USA Today tells you that your voice and your stories are important ... there really isn't anything anyone can tell you after that to make you think otherwise."

Many of Neuharth's children and grandchildren also were on-hand Friday to share their memories.

"The Al Neuharth we knew was no BS, whether it was striking fear in the heart of some unsuspecting waiter in whatever city we happened to be in, or asking a nurse for vodka and aspirin minutes after

■ NEUHARTH,
Page 7

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