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The incredible life of Brighton's Valerio Kusminsky

MARCH 20, 2009

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The essence of a life lived rarely starts with memberships in this association or titles with that group, although Valerio Kusminsky had that covered.

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The retired Brighton businessman devoted time to various causes after moving here from Argentina in the early 1960s. He helped reinvent a local Hispanic business organization, was a longtime member of a group devoted to understanding the world, raised money for a local foundation.

Yet friends remembered that the horn on his beloved 1958 Chevy convertible, which Kusminsky drove only in the summer, tooted the Spanish folk song, "La Cucaracha."

He loved talking politics. "We solved the world's problems, I can't tell you how many times," said longtime friend Eduardo Navarro, head of the Rochester Hispanic Business Association.

To the end of his life, which came last week for the respected leader and go-to-guy in local Hispanic community, Kusminsky, 78, made his familia smile.

"He never lost his sense of humor," said Gustavo "Gus" Kusminsky, the oldest of his four sons. "He made us laugh every single day."

An optician, Kusminsky owned two shops in Argentina where he sold eyeglasses, including Bausch & Lomb brands.

It's that B&L connection that brought him here from South America. He worked a few years for the company and took odd jobs to support his family.

One of those jobs, his son said, taught him the paving business. He started his own company, Pittsford Paving Inc., not long after, in 1966. Two of his sons still run the business on Brighton-Henrietta Town Line Road.

Along the way, Kusminsky helped rebuild the Rochester Hispanic Business Association in the '90s, as a chairman and member of its governing board, by formalizing its structure, recruiting new members and mentoring younger ones. The group named Kusminsky, who also served on local community boards, businessman of the year in 1994.

"He was very approachable," said Navarro, one of many who sought his business advice. "If you needed a door opened, he'd help open that door."

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Denise-Marie Santiago

Denise-Marie grew up in the Rochester's Bull's Head area. She started writing for newspapers during her sophomore year at Our Lady of Mercy High School and went on to the University of Missouri-Columbia. Her first paying job was covering town government at the now-defunct Rochester *Times-Union*. She packed her Chevette two years later and drove alone across the country to work at the *Los Angeles Times*. The following year, she returned to the East Coast to write news and features for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. After 10 years, she took a leave to listen to music and eat wonderful food while running her brother's jazz club in Rochester. Soon after, she gave up her Philadelphia job to marry one of the customers. They live in Brighton with their two children.



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Kusminsky was married 35 years before his wife, Irene, died in 1993. But he found a second home at a restaurant formerly known as Portobello Ristorante.

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He held court there several nights a week, always wearing a sport coat and tie, regaling the regulars with his memories of the tango, his take on current affairs and his love of soccer.

A member of the local American Committee on Foreign Relations, Kusminsky initiated passionate discussions.

"The bar was not a bar," said Paula Vitale, the restaurant's former owner and a friend. "It was a political forum with Val."

He returned often to his native Argentina and once flew in an Argentine chef from Chicago for a fundraising event for the Rochester Area Foundation.

A lifetime smoker who rebuffed his sons' pleas to quit, Kusminsky was diagnosed with lung cancer two years ago.

Then one of his sons suffered a brain injury when he fell while working on a roof in New York City. The father never got over seeing his now-incapacitated son, Richard, in the hospital, Vitale said.

Still, she said, Kusminsky accepted his cancer with aplomb. "He'd say, 'People would be so jealous of my life because I had an incredible life.'"

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