

Beloved elections director, husband, father passes on

Written by By Babette Herrmann Sun Editor
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Rick Palochak remembered

If you ever frequent the McKinley County Courthouse area, you may have recognized the tall lanky man with glasses, outside on a break, catching a quick smoke and some fresh air. If you crossed his path, he may have said hello to you, or given you a nod if you knew him.

He was the director of the Bureau of Elections, and possessed an obvious sternness, as many supervisors do. But when he spoke, he was at the ready to help answer any questions (yes, even from a reporter), and with a warm smile. He would go out of his way to get the documentation that was necessary to craft a solid election story.

This man was Rick Palochak, and he passed away the early morning hours of Dec. 17, at the age of 62. Palochak retired from the county in June to focus on his health as he fought the devastating scourge of small cell lung cancer.

Palochak, who earned his Associates Degree in auto mechanics from UNM-G, started at the county as a voting machine technician about 25 years ago. Part technical, part mechanically savvy, this was the perfect role for him. Most of his career was spent in the top position, a role he took a chance on and applied for, and got to his surprise, his wife City Councilor Fran Palochak said.

Her late husband not only had a knack for fixing things, he was also passionate about making sure all voters were aware of the district they lived in so they can vote without a hitch. He did everything he could to ensure voters had access to reliable voting machines, and was rightly

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bummed if one malfunctioned. He created detailed maps so voters knew the exact location of their polling place.

She said, he would tell her, “we have to make voting fair for everybody.”

And leaving his post to tend to his health was tough for the meticulous Rick Palochak, his wife said. He wanted to make sure he wasn’t leaving any stones unturned.

“He wished that he had more time to train people,” she said. “But sickness took over.”

Fran Palochak said her husband was a good father to his children, and worked a second job to make sure they had the best education possible, sending them to private school and one off to college.

He helped to support his daughter Susan, who was a Color Guard with a Lubbock, TX drum corp., making it a point to attend her performances.

When one of two sons took up skateboarding, he built a half-pipe that took up much of the backyard.

“He loved his family,” she said. “He liked helping people, putting everyone else first.”

Fran Palochak said she first encountered her beloved husband when they were kids. They met at the Catholic Youth Association, and both became good friends. Both joined the service, with Fran heading off to the Navy, and Rick the Airforce.

After they both returned to Gallup, the two connected as they shared a camaraderie for all things military. A budding romance developed on top of an already great friendship. And they

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spent the next 36 years building a life together.

“We were like Frick and Frack,” she said. “Now I am just Frack.”

Heartbroken, but strong in her faith, Fran Palochak said the last few months of her husband’s life was difficult. He seemed to get all the adverse side effects from chemotherapy, and in recent months had an extended stay at a hospital in Albuquerque due to pneumonia.

“When you love someone this much, you hate to see them suffer,” she said. “I miss the healthy Rick.”

The memorial service for Rick Palochak takes place at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, 214 W. Wilson at 10:30 am, Dec. 30.

By Babette Herrmann
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