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Main Line Suburban Life > Opinion

The Scribbler: My best to you

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A piece of Malvern died last week. A very important piece.

His name was Sam Burke. Without him, the Borough of Malvern might have been lost to bankruptcy. Without him, Malvern would lack the infrastructure it has. Without him, Malvern would not look or feel or be what it is today.

Frank Capra imagined "It's A Wonderful Life," but the real Jimmy Stewart lived in Malvern.

In his back yard a couple of weeks ago, Sam and a couple of old friends sit under his favorite shade tree talking over old times. He decides that week to disconnect a fibrillator implant because of the pain it caused whenever it went to work. He is at peace with a long, productive life. Usually one to listen rather than talk, he talks and laughs freely this afternoon. There is much to remember.

Sam is born the same day as Hitler, April 20, 1920, God's effort to make amends, his wife once quips. He is an Irish Protestant in one of Philadelphia's tough Irish Catholic neighborhoods, but he is never singled out; hits matter in sandlot, not religions.

He graduates from West Philadelphia High and aspires to be a doctor, but it is the Depression, so he settles for nursing school. It is fortunate, because he meets a dazzling young nursing student named Betty Schwab. Being non-impulsive, scientific types they don't marry until 1943.

Her trousseau is a bike and a job teaching nursing for \$60 a month. That first Christmas, she gives him a bike, too, so they can get around the city together.

After service in the Navy he and a friend start the Malvern Institute on King Street, a rehab for recovering alcoholics, in the late '40s. But the call of medicine is strong and in 1960 Sam becomes an anesthetist at Graduate Hospital in the city.

In the warm August sun, he tells his friends of long hospital hours and the joy of operating-room precision and teamwork. He drifts off for awhile. The other two talk quietly.

Betty and Sam move to Malvern in 1950 to raise a family; Betty drops her job in favor of raising Joe (1949), David (1951), Philip (1955) and Karen (1960). As the kids grow, she gets involved in the Boy Scouts, other borough activities and, eventually, local politics.

Which, after much resistance, leads Sam to the Malvern Council in 1982. Why the resistance? Because Sam, a man of few words, all of which are straightforward, distrusts most politicians – people of many words, few of which are straight.

He describes the early '90s, when, as chairman of the Finance Committee, he and another council member discover the

borough manager has been switching money between accounts to hide huge expenditures. They go to another Malvernite, Pat McGuigan, whose Army career included managing bases the size of Radnor, and ask him to take over. When he does, they discover the town is nearly bankrupt – in fact they quietly (to avoid a panic) borrow money for three months just to make payroll.

Within a year, Malvern is in the black and Sam is council president. He and Pat eventually pay off \$5 million in borough debt. They get county and state grants that bring \$5 million of revitalization to Malvern: a new bridge over the railroad tracks and new sidewalks in the business area as well as low-income neighborhoods, enhancing local businesses and generating self-pride.

By the late '90s, Malvern's self-operated water system, valued at \$450,000, has fallen behind new regulations. To become compliant will cost between \$500,000 and well over a million. Fortunately Aqua offers to buy the system "as is" for appraised value. Many would have leaped at the deal. But Pat discovers that Aqua must go through Malvern to get water to the rest of the county. Final price: \$1.35 million.

Sam cites that as one of his proudest accomplishments. There are laughs and smiles and the comfort of old friends with nothing to hide. It is a special afternoon.

The burial last Saturday is conducted the way Sam lived – without fanfare. Just wife, children, grandchildren and a couple of friends attend. A few words from the Bible, some murmurs of love, soft handfuls of dirt, and the poetry of silent tears.

When ending phone calls or visits, Sam frequently voiced the sentiment, "My best to you!" Fortunately for Malvern, he meant it.

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