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CENTERPIECE

Celestino recalled as community minded newspaper leader

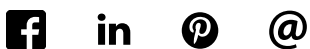
MARK SCHEER | mark.scheer@niagara-gazette.com

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Niagara Gazette Publisher John Celestino chats with reader and retired Niagara Falls teacher Barbara Yandian during a Niagara Gazette-sponsored breakfast at the Jetport in 2017.

James Neiss photo



Whenever he needed help promoting his family's annual Coats for Kids campaign, Russ Petrozzi knew he could always count on John Celestino to lend a hand.

The owner of Capital Cleaners, whose father Joe Petrozzi started the annual campaign to provide gently used coats to needy children in the Niagara Falls area decades ago, said the former Niagara Gazette and Lockport Union-Sun & Journal publisher never hesitated to support the local effort.

"He was always on the run from here to there and everywhere, but when it came time to help somebody, especially Coats for Kids, he always took the time," Petrozzi said. "He helped me immensely with Coats for Kids. He was always concerned about helping me make it a success for the kids."

Petrozzi said he was "totally devastated" to learn over the weekend about Celestino's death on Friday at age 63.

He said Celestino was a regular customer at his company's Lewiston location. Over the years, Petrozzi said he and his staff came to know him as more than a newspaper publisher and more like a friend.

"He was always concerned and tried to make Niagara Falls a better place," Petrozzi said. "Everyone I know respected him and liked him and he's going to be sorely missed by everyone."

New York state Assemblyman Angelo Morinello, R-Niagara Falls, developed a strong friendship with Celestino over the years. The assemblyman said the pair dined out together and engaged in frequent conversations that most often focused on family and life, not the state of affairs in Albany or the newspaper business.

"We spun away from the media side and we became personal friends," Morinello said. "We would go to dinner and we talked about food and family. I knew him as a person and as a human being and I thought he was really and truly a good human being."

Morinello said it was clear to him that Celestino took great pride in his role as the publisher of the two Niagara County newspapers and several other publications in New York state and the Boston area.

“He loved his paper. He loved his people. He worked his position to the best of his ability, which I think benefited everyone,” Morinello said.

A Philadelphia native, Celestino had a passion for writing at an early age. He graduated from Temple University with a bachelor’s degree in communications and journalism and hoped to parlay his education into a career as a reporter.

After leaving college, he got his first newspaper job as a telemarketing sales representative at The Philadelphia Inquirer. He planned to eventually move on to a position in the newspaper’s editorial department, but his knack for being a salesman kept him on the business side of the operation. He worked for the Inquirer in various sales and sales management positions for 14 years.

In 2003, he accepted a position at The Press of Atlantic City where spent 13 years working in the advertising department and as circulation director.

In the spring of 2017, Celestino accepted a position as publisher of the Union-Sun & Journal and the Niagara Gazette. He was later promoted to a position as regional executive for the newspapers’ parent company, CNHI, LLC. In his capacity as regional executive, Celestino oversaw the operations of the Niagara Gazette, the Lockport Union Sun & Journal, the Plattsburgh Press Republican and multiple daily and weekly publications in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Cheryl Phillips, who succeeded Celestino as publisher of the Niagara Gazette and Lockport Union-Sun & Journal, described him as a “great friend, mentor and overall leader.”

She summed up his approach to running newspapers in one word: “Passionate.”

“He had so much passion about everything he cared for: his family, food and newspapers,” Phillips said. “He was so happy to be able to come back to newspapers and embraced the challenges head-on. He fully understood the importance of newspapers and the communities they served.”

Phillips noted that Celestino was a “self-proclaimed news junkie” who read at least six or seven newspapers a day and watched television news day and night.

“He had such a positive energy that you couldn’t help but want to be around it. He was invested in his people and as a leader pushed others into the spotlight so they could achieve more. He was selfless that way,” she said.

Donna Barrett, CNHI president and CEO, described Celestino as an accomplished and valued company executive.

“John was a shining star for our company and we are devastated,” said Barrett. “His positive energy was the driving force behind his success with the newspapers in his region. He brought out the best of everyone on his team and I never heard him say an unkind word about anyone. He was a kind, thoughtful, wonderful man who was devoted to this business.”

Celestino lived in Lewiston. He is survived by two daughters, Andrea and Julia Celestino.

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