

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: The Irreplaceable Rodney Kreunin

October 18, 2015

"Mitch. It's Uncle Rodney." That's how Former Wisconsin Railroad Commissioner Rodney Kreunin would always start our phone conversations. He wasn't really my uncle but it sure seemed like it.

Rodney affectionately referred to me as his adopted son. He called frequently to check up on me after my stroke and corporate radio lay-off in June of 2014. He had a heart the size of the trains he loved so much. Like he did for countless others, Rodney sent me news clippings and flower seeds and yes, gift cards to McDonald's. "We have to keep you strong son," Rodney would always say.

Rodney was a frequent guest on my radio shows over the years, pitching commuter rail or high speed rail to Chicago. He loved to tell the story of his youthful phone call to a retired Winston Churchill who actually picked up the phone and spoke to him. When Uncle Rodney spoke of Churchill and the brave British pilots in the Battle of Britain, he would well up in tears.

He called into the radio show to help us remember important dates. Mitch, remember April 18th is the day of Paul Revere's ride and also the day of Jimmy Doolittle's raid on Japan in 1941." Rodney said he remembered the raid vividly as a 5-year old, as his grandmother talked to him about important historical events. "Grandmother said she remembers watching Roosevelt come through on the train. I said Grandmother, some of us think Roosevelt tilted the country toward Socialism." Grandmother said, "Not that young upstart Franklin. I'm talking about Teddy!"

I was not a big fan of the commuter rail idea but Rodney never gave up on me. He finally convinced me to ride on the Metra from Harvard, Illinois to Des Plaines to visit a new casino there. Rodney didn't gamble. He cheerfully rooted for me as I lost at Blackjack.

He loved Tommy Thompson. They were like two little boys in their love of trains. Tommy showed his love for Rodney last Friday on my radio show as he remembered his longtime friend. Rodney was a Conservative Republican but had many Progressive friends. One example is Capital Times Editor Emeritus Dave Zweifel, who also had great affection for Rodney and trains.

Rodney had a twinkle in his eye when he recalled how he and his buddies would ride their motorcycles on Blackhawk Golf Course more than 60 years ago. One of those buddies is now a well-known businessman in Madison whose identity will remain a secret. "We worked hard to keep our motorcycles off the greens," he chuckled.

Famous playwright Garson Kanin once said that, "No one is indispensable, but there are a few who are irreplaceable." Like Rodney Kreunin. Uncle Rodney earns a spot on that squad as first team All-American.

Mitch Henck is heard on WXXM-FM, The Mic 92.1 Monday-Friday, 8-11 a.m. and on the livestream of his show at www.mitchhenck.com. Write to Mitch: mitch@mitchhenck.com