

"Federation Corner" column
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In praise of grass roots activism

by Danila Sheveiko
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The Wayne Goldstein Award is given each year by the Montgomery County Civic Federation to an individual or group for outstanding service to the people of Montgomery County. This year's recipient was Danila Sergeyevich Sheveiko of the Kensington Heights Civic Association. His acceptance speech, printed below, was moving and memorable and deserves to be widely read.

I have a lot of people to thank, and that would be reading a long list, so allow me instead to spend these few short minutes and explain how Wayne Goldstein taught me about freedom.

Let's start with a confession--I did not know Wayne. This is especially embarrassing because he was the president of my civic association. It is also ironic because my ignorance of Wayne would end with his death, and the events his passing precipitated would change my life forever.

You see, I am a Russian-Ukrainian immigrant that came here for freedom and capitalism. Back in the Soviet Union, my great-grandfathers--successful farmers and business owners--were branded enemies of the state and sent to the gulags. Growing up, I got into trouble at school for refusing to wear the Communist lapel pin with Lenin's face on it. My parents read forbidden books on microfiche using microscopes. And our phone was bugged by the KGB when it was still a big deal.

So that's why I came here. I got a degree in Finance, and could explain capitalism. But knowing what the absence of freedom is did not get me closer to grasping the actual concept. I would quote Malcolm X--"Price of freedom is death"--without really understanding it. Then I learned that our clothes are made in sweatshops, and our smartphones are made in factories with suicide nets...and, I am ashamed to admit, I got disenchanted with America and started quoting that great Canadian poet Leonard Cohen: "I love the country, but I hate the scene. I am neither left nor right, I am just staying home tonight, getting lost in that hopeless little screen."

Don't get me wrong--I did not completely drop out. I spent years volunteering for local humanitarian causes and defended Americans against unjust criticism in the Russian national media. But I was clueless as to how this place really works until, nearly five years ago, Wayne died on the County Council steps. Weeks after his passing, Costco broke off negotiations with Lee Development in Aspen Hill and, boosted by County waivers and subsidies, headed to Westfield Mall in Wheaton with a plan to build the busiest gas station in Montgomery County just 118 feet away from my family's home.

Despite our best efforts to compromise, and even sacrifice, on the Costco warehouse itself, the project got a blank check and the green light from County government. A small group of neighbors and friends assembled, and we were left on our own to face Costco Wholesale, the nation's fourth largest corporate retailer, and Westfield Group, the largest retail real estate property holder on Planet Earth.

That's when Jane Folsom, who has also passed now--a Certified Weed Warrior and ally of Wayne's in battles large and small--explained to me Wayne's role and legacy. And she quoted Jefferson: "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." That's when my eyes opened, ladies and gentlemen, and I saw the grass roots--people of all parties, races and creeds engaged in a never-ending non-partisan battle... sacrificing nights and weekends to pour over budgets, watching out for every penny of taxpayer funds... and attending endless hearings to make sure we have clean air to breathe and clean water to drink.

In my own battle for the right to breathe, as one democratic institution after another failed us miserably, I realized the true meaning of grass roots. The trees are gone, and the shrubs and flowers destroyed. Even the grass itself is gone. And all we have holding everything together are these roots!

As chances for victory in the Costco gas battle are receding along with my hairline, I am reminded of a saying--"If you sacrifice everything and win, you are a hero. If you sacrifice everything and lose, you are a fool." So what did I win? I met all these wonderful people. That gave me hope!

I saw Sophia Maravell fighting to save her father's farm. I saw Diane Cameron fighting to defend every forest and creek. I saw Manny Garcia, an award-winning journalist, fighting for the right to do his job without fear of arrest and persecution. And I saw Steve Kanstoroom, a friend of Wayne's and last year's Goldstein Award recipient, risking arrest to fight powerful development interests that erased from the maps a kinship community's access road, so a neighborhood of African American descendants of pre-Civil War freed slaves could not get postal addresses and government services in 21st century Maryland.

That's when I understood the nature of grass roots--they are very hard to kill...and they refuse go to away, breaking through the asphalt and the concrete that chokes them, developing resistance to the herbicides that poison them. Grass roots persevere and fight back no matter the odds, to give people hope and a reason to live.

So, thank you to the Civic Federation for keeping the flame. Thank you to Wayne Goldstein for teaching me that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance and death when necessary. And thank you to my family for giving me the values and the skills to defend them.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to montgomerycivic@yahoo.com