



Opinion: Gary Niebur Made Edwardsville YMCA Place for 'Everyone'

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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(Gary Niebur, the long-time Edwardsville YMCA CEO/Edwardsville Mayor Died on Saturday).

The Edwardsville YMCA has been such a prime force for my family since we moved back to the region.



Around the time we moved here, I met a key man - then Edwardsville YMCA CEO /Mayor Gary Niebur - who I believe helped make the Y what it is today.

Gary was perhaps the nicest, most congenial politician/CEO I had ever met. He always took time for you and for the moments you talked with him; he made you feel like you were the most important person in the world. Gary truly cared about the region, its people, and especially the countless members of the Y.

What I admired most of Gary, wasn't the \$10 million he raised in his tenure at the YMCA, but how he tried to make the Y part of everyone's lives, not just the affluent. He rallied the affluent around the Y to carry out that mission.

In my last interview with Gary, he said the following:

“When we say the Y is a special place for all, we mean it. My thought has always been this about who we are and what we are supposed to do. We don't go out and pat ourselves on the back about it. It is simply what we are supposed to do.”

Gary established the Financial Assistance/Scholarship program that made it possible for everyone to participate in the Edwardsville YMCA, regardless of economic condition.

I personally cannot imagine not having the YMCA in my life or in the lives of my children, who have utilized the swim, gymnastics, basketball, tennis and summer camp programs. All of them learned to swim at the Y.

I am insulin-dependent and I don't know if I could properly take care of my blood sugars and remain healthy without my long-time membership. I swim and constantly use the gym at the YMCA.



Today, I stopped in the Meyer Center parking lot on my way to Liberty Middle School track to run. The beautiful Meyer Center is now empty because of COVID-19, and took a photo of the outside and thought of Gary. Without Gary's fund-raising abilities, the Meyer Center would not exist today.

I know so many who have enjoyed the YMCA from almost birth to 90 years, who would not have had the opportunities they have without Gary.

In my final interview with Gary, he recalled a conversation he had with a woman who swam at the Y. When Gary said to her, "You really must love to swim."

The woman whispered back: "Don't tell anybody, but I really don't like to swim."

He said to her if you don't like swimming, why do you do it? The woman replied: "Gary, this is really my home away from home. I don't have any family in the area and I am not really very close to my neighbors. If I can't come to the Y and swim and sit in the lobby. I don't know what I am going to do. I don't really like to swim, but I like to see these folks I call my friends."

When people lost their jobs, Gary would make sure those individuals could still come to the Y and enjoy their workouts and socialize with the members. Time after time, he took money out of his own pocket to help people. He was extremely generous.

Without Y lessons, my kids would not be able to swim. So really, the Y impacts everyone, from those just born, with its daycare program, to those nearing the end of their lives.

Edwardsville YMCA Breakers head swim coach Bob Rettle summed up how we all feel about Gary with some choice words: "I loved him. He was much more than a pillar or community leader."

Probably what I respected most about Gary was how much he loved his wife, Debby, his children, and grandchildren. In almost every conversation with him, he talked about how lucky he was to have his wife and what she had meant to him and his family. When the grandchildren came around, they had a special place in his heart.

"Edwardsville is a great place and this Y is a great place," Gary once told me. "I will always be thankful for my experiences."

The Edwardsville region would not be what it is today without the tireless work of this man, who others appropriately described as "a true community servant and dedicated family man." Gary always had a smile on his face and he took the time to have an impact on everyone - from the least to most affluent in society.