



Sam Leask Remembered

Committed. That's how people describe Samuel Leask III, who died last month following a year-long bout with cancer. His 25-plus years of public service confirm that he was a man who cared deeply about the future of his community. Sam Leask was also an intensely private man with a side to him that only a few personal friends were allowed to see.

Understanding Leask is impossible without first grasping the nature of the world and family he was born into 61 years ago. Public service has been a Leask family tradition ever since Sam Leask's paternal grandfather opened the family department store in 1892. Maternal grandfather Dr. T.W. Drillard served three terms as mayor of Santa Cruz; Sam Leask's father picked up where he left off, serving as chief administrative officer of Los Angeles and later as a director in Governor Pat Brown's administration.

Sam grew up in a much simpler time and place, graduating from Santa Cruz High when it was the only school in town. After stints at USC, the Army, and with several Midwestern retail stores, he returned home to manage his family's store.

From the beginning, he was determined to fulfill what he saw as his duty to the community. "When I met Sam 30 years ago, he was trying to convince me to serve on the planning commission," recalls longtime friend Robert Rittenhouse, Sr.

But Sam Leask never asked anyone to do something he wouldn't do himself. Over the years, he worked hard and often with many business and governmental groups, including the Chamber of Commerce, the Downtown Association, the Santa Cruz City Council (serving as mayor in 1967), the California Retailers Association (he was president), Blue Cross of Northern California (he was chairman) and the Off-Street Parking Commission. And he did all this while running a business and raising a family.

In public life, Sam Leask came across as reserved, even stern, choosing his words carefully and then standing by them regardless of their popularity. "Sam was stubborn as an Army mule once his mind was made up," remembers James Wilson, a hunting buddy. "One time he wanted to drive this jeep across a river. I told him we'd get stuck, but he just went ahead. Sure enough, we got stuck."

Yet even his political opponents recognized that beneath that gruff exterior was an intelligent, fair and honorable man. "Sam was a worthy adversary, but he never fought dirty," says Steve Carlson, who helped lead the fight against the Lighthouse Field convention center in 1973 that Leask supported. "I think he was wrong about a lot of things, but I never thought he was in it for a fast buck."

Neal Coonerty recalls a public meeting on that controversial center. "The Civic was packed with people, 99 percent of whom were opposed to the convention center. But Sam got up and defended the proposal without losing his temper or willingness to listen."

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Sam Leask

That was the *public* Sam Leask; privately, the coolness was replaced by "warmth, humor and kindness," says friend Eugene Fleming. "Not many people know about it, but many times Sam would help out the people who worked for him when they got in a fix. He didn't have to—he wanted to."

Sam Leask extended that same sort of friendship even to those who actively opposed him. "Sam and I disagreed about almost everything," says Norman Lezin, owner of the Salz Tannery. "But that didn't stop us from being friends. He was always there to help me when I needed it. Sam Leask was a man you could count on."

—Richard Stone

LETTERS

review of The Well Bean Deli (GT, 11-5), has us realizing that your "food wri