

Leo Rundstein, a remembrance

Before I came to Westbury, back in 1989, Martha Upton sent me a picture book with every choir member's picture and name on it. By the time we got here, I had everybody's name and face memorized, which was quite a feat for me and it seemed to please folks.

So I remembered Leo's name real well for a while. But then I began to confuse him with another pillar of the choir and the church, Homer Finck. They were both on important committees, from about the same generation, both sang bass, and both names included the letters "e" and "o." It took me a while to get the names back on the right faces but Leo was always gracious about it, and so was Homer for that matter.

At some point in our friendship with the Rundsteins we learned about a time, back in the late 60s, I believe, when Leo got very sick and Jackie went back to school so she could get a teaching certificate and support their family should he passed on. But he got better and worked until 1991. There was toughness in Leo that you didn't see in his personality.

Leo had a host of health problems in the 90s, and we thought he wasn't long for this world then. But he fooled us all. Once, when we were talking, I told him, "you're a tough old bird, Leo," and he said with his gentle humor, something like, "yeah, I guess I am."

He surely must have complained, but most of what I saw was a stoic and gracious acceptance of his circumstances.

I saw Leo once with a grandchild, and I was struck by the level of affection he showed, as he asked if he could fix the child a sandwich. That must have been a great gift to his children and grandchildren. Great sandwiches, too, I hear.

Leo had a great sense of humor, although it was subtle. He wrote in his funeral plan, "have the organ play loud on the last verse [of "Amazing Grace"] so I can hear it." I think he would like us to sing loud, too. At the memorial service, we sang so loud that I'm sure he heard us, although my own voice was pretty "quavery."

He was a very faithful member of the Sanctuary Choir. As his obituary says, he loved all kinds of music. Sarah remembers his kindness and encouragement about her organ preludes and postludes. Simple things like, "that was real good, Sarah."

He and Jackie went to every choir retreat from 1990 until he couldn't go any more because of his health. At one of the early retreats, I remember the skit they did about how to pronounce the name of the town, "Refugio." In the skit they were traveling Refugio, and stopped in a restaurant in Refugio for something to eat. They argued back and forth—very convincingly—about how to pronounce the name of the town, and finally the cute little waitress, Evelyn Smith, approached the table and asked if they were ready to order. They asked her "how do you pronounce the name of this place. Say it very slowly." Evelyn replied, "Dairy Queen," with five vowels in each syllable. I can't imagine anyone doing that skit as well as Jackie and Leo—and Evelyn Smith—although several have tried.

Leo didn't talk a lot about his faith, at least not to me. But we know it was there, deep and abiding. Sometimes people get so full of themselves they think they are invincible. They can do anything. That's called hubris, and I don't think Leo ever had a single ounce of hubris. By his humility and his gentle acceptance of his place in the scheme of things, in God's creation if you will, he showed us a better way—a way of humility, humor, acceptance of people, and love. He lived his faith better than most of us will ever talk it.

...Randy Zercher, February 6, 2003