In memory of a true citizen

The Civic Beat
Charlene LaVoie

Ten years ago, on July 28, 1999, my friend George Sherwood died. Born in 1917, George was a true democrat (little "d" intended). He and his wife, Ruth, moved into the Bronson Homestead in Winchester Center in 1951 with their three children. Then they had four more. The children still own the homestead.

George was a glider pilot and alpine skier in World War II, then an aeronautical engineer for the state of Connecticut, where he helped plan and design Bradley Airport. Legend has it he landed a helicopter in his backyard in Winchester Center during the Flood of 1955 to deliver aid. Or was it for the Blueberry Bazaar?

George was the first person I met when I arrived in Winsted in June 1990 to develop the Community Lawyer/Advocate Project. We were introduced at his renowned and one-of-a-kind Winchester Center Kerosene Lamp Museum on the Winchester Green at 100 Old Waterbury Turnpike. The small structure, formerly a general store, was also home to the Winchester Center Post Office, with its beautiful, old post office boxes. The lamp museum was stuffed to the rafters with historic kerosene lamps and parts. George also had the original patent books for many of the lighting ideas that were developed in the 19th century.

He gave me the tour, pointing out this lamp and describing that part. He came upon a solid piece of translucent aqua green glass in the shape of a pyramid and the size of a cantaloupe. He got that characteristic playful, wise guy look in his eye and asked me if I knew what it was, confident that I did not. I happened to know that it was a deck prism used to provide light below a ship's deck. He was suitably impressed. We became fast friends from that moment.

The museum was written about in publications throughout the country. This small, unpretentious but grand institution graced Winchester Center for many years. In the end, George donated much of his prized collection to the Smithsonian, which was grateful to have it.

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He was the consummate public citizen. In the 1960s, George joined with Shafeek Nader and others to establish Northwestern Connecticut Community College — another accomplishment in the long line of citizen initiatives in Winsted history.

Ruth operated the Winchester Center Post Office from the early 1980s and George ran it after her death in 1990. He ran it like a social club for people to gather and talk. He was a town historian. He was a committed volunteer, serving on commissions and committees throughout his long residence in Winsted. He was also a writer. He was proud of the Calvados he made.

He was funny and direct — often cantankerous — and always seemed as though he was having more fun than everyone else. Since I didn't know anyone when I first moved to Winsted, George started a Friday evening "salon" in his 1790 home. He invited a variety of people, and we soon were having suppers where we served foods of the various nationalities of those attending. (The 1816 addition to the house was built by Captain William Swift for Squire Isaac Bronson. Captain Swift also built the Rockwell House in Winsted and the Colebrook Store.)

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George loved spirited, intelligent conversation, good food and martinis. But George could spin a yarn, and often we couldn't tell whether he was recounting actual events or making it up. It didn't matter! We read aloud from The Winsted Wildman and talked about everything from politics to movies, confident that we could be candid. I learned plenty!

George loved to travel. I rediscovered a packet of letters that he sent me while traveling in Turkey and elsewhere in the early 1990s. He wrote long, detailed letters that made me feel that I was wherever he was.

During the short-lived but beloved Kite Festival, held at Platt Hill, George took the opportunity to dress as one of his favorite historic figures, Ben Franklin. Children and adults alike were captivated. In many ways, George was like Franklin — charming, smart, gracious, flirtatious. He was a Renaissance man who was never bored and never wasted his time when he could be embracing the world, making it his own.

Charlene LaVoie is the community lawyer in Winsted. Her office is funded by the Shafeek Nader Trust for the Community Interest.