

NEWS

Former Sussex Airport owner, champion of aviation, dies at 96

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SUSSEX BOROUGH -- Paul Styger, a lifelong borough resident whose romance with aviation was reflected in his leadership of Sussex Airport for more than half a century, has died at the age of 96.

Styger, who passed away Wednesday at Barn Hill Care Center in Newton, leaves behind a legacy whose crowning achievement was the annual Sussex Air Show, where breathtaking acts of aerobatics and showmanship drew performers and spectators from across the Eastern Seaboard for more than 30 years until the show ended its run in 2004.

Styger later was forced to sell the airport in 2013 following a rash of financial and legal woes, but those who knew him best suggested he deserves to be remembered far more for a wonderful life defined by compassion, service to his country and community, and a can-do belief in the dreams that inspired his later successes.

"Paul was a gentle, kind soul who didn't have a bad word to say about anybody," said Sandy Mitchell, a borough resident.

"He was generous to a fault with his time and talent, and most of all, he always tried to make people feel good about being on this planet."

A graduate of Sussex High School, Styger attended Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute for a time before going on to serve his country as a member of the United States Air Force in World War II.

After returning home, he and four partners drew up a vision for Sussex Airport, located in Wantage, which they built into a regional institution of which Styger himself eventually acquired sole ownership by the 1950s.

With numerous aviation awards to his name, Styger remained equally dedicated to his hometown and his church, the First Baptist Church of Sussex, which he served in various capacities over a period of decades including as a deacon, trustee and church moderator.

Most of all, like so many of his contemporaries of the so-called Greatest Generation, Styger was a quintessential family man who loved his wife of 70 years, Jean Styger, and their four children, and treasured their summers vacationing together at Vernon's Lake Pochung.

Sussex Borough Mayor Kathy Little, who has known Styger and his family for more than 60 years, said Thursday that she was aware from her recent conversations with Jean Styger that her husband, Paul, hadn't been well lately.

"I've known Paul and Jean since I was a teenager because they lived down the street from where I lived and belonged to the same church, and Paul was my Sunday school teacher," said Little, who recalled them all singing together in the church choir in later years.

Little said the steeple atop the church, inside of which she said is a clock that was donated many years ago, owes its existence to a restoration effort that Styger himself spearheaded.

Styger also lent his support to numerous civic activities and served two years as president of the Sussex High School PTA and five years as a member of the Sussex High School Board of Education. He later went on to serve 12 years as a member of the High Point Regional High School Board of Education after that school's opening in 1966.

Firmly grounded in the values of faith and family, Styger was equally inspired by the possibilities he imagined when looking to the heavens.

The air show he pioneered at Sussex Airport, to hear those who knew him tell it, was a pure labor of love. The annual event, an end-of-summer rite in Sussex County for 32 years, drew pilots and acts from across the United States and all over the world, and put the little airport on the map for its "Best in the East" small airport show.

Even as the show grew, he never hesitated to call upon those closest to him for help or advice.

"Whenever he was having the show, he would call me for any suggestions or to write a prelude to go in the program book," Little said. "And we had a great Sussex Air Show. It was the best air show around."

Years later, when Mitchell started a foundation to promote the arts in Sussex County, Styger offered to help by allowing the now-defunct organization, known as Spirit of the Arts Foundation, to hold an annual festival and extravaganza on the airport grounds.

Although she had been acquainted with Styger before then, Mitchell said it was through her work with the foundation that she came to truly know and appreciate him.

"He was always delightful, just a pleasant person to be around, and so was his wife," Mitchell said. "But most of all, he just loved being at the airport. Always, he and his cronies would be upstairs laughing and having a good time. I used to just love to hang out and listen to the stories."

Styger's contributions to aviation did not go unnoticed by his peers in the industry, who inducted him into the New Jersey Aviation Hall of Fame in May 1995.

The honor was just one of many he received over his long career.

Much to his dismay, Styger's final years as owner of the airport became mired in controversy over a Federal Aviation Administration grant for improvements to the airport's runway, airfield and taxiway that were never completed. With the airport falling on financial hard times, Styger later admitted redirecting some of the money for other purposes and was ordered to pay it back, resulting in the airport's sale in December 2013.

Still, Mitchell said, "He had a great life, and he loved what he did. If you're going to live as long as Paul lived and still have the zest for life he did, that's wonderful. We should all celebrate the fun he had and the life he lived."

Styger's death Wednesday came two days after his 96th birthday.

Those wishing to pay their respects may do so at Pinkel Funeral Home from noon to 1 p.m. Saturday. A memorial service at the funeral home and private funeral will follow immediately afterward.

Paul Styger's obituary is online [here](#).

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