

Stephen M. "Skip" Rucinski

With family at his side, Stephen "Skip" Rucinski, 66, passed away on January 19, 2013.

Skip was born on November 23, 1946, in Newark, New Jersey, to Walter and Natalie (Zino) Rucinski. In 1964, he graduated from Newark's West Side High School, where he was

a standout baseball player. Outside of class, Skip worked as an apprentice draftsman.

Skip enlisted in the U.S. Air Force after high school and was stationed at the Grand Forks Air Force Base for the duration of his service from 1967 to 1970, serving as a helicopter mechanic and crew chief. While still an airman, Skip met the love of his life, Deborah Anne (Nelson) of Grand Forks. They married on September 23, 1968.

A veteran maintenance professional of 43 years, Skip joined the Grand Forks International Airport in 1970 and was quietly planning to retire on March 14, 2014. As the longest serving employee of the airport, Skip's knowledge of the airfield and its facilities was legendary. Over the years, he worked with countless airport service providers, many of whom will remember him as a friend. His children and their grade school classmates have fond memories of Skip's one-of-a-kind airport tours. His grandchildren, too, have lasting memories of rides in Truck No. 9 at "Papa's Airport."

Above all, Skip loved his family. He was a devoted, caring husband and committed father and grandfather. Skip coached youth hockey, basketball and other sports, and when not on the bench rarely missed a game or practice (including 5 a.m. figure skating and countless 500-mile hockey road trips). Skip loved watching his children play, practice and compete, and for many winters maintained a backyard hockey rink where lasting family memories were made. Skip was an active "hockey dad" and a former president of the Grand Forks Blue Line Club.

He enjoyed history, music (new and old), classic cars, good tools, old James Bond movies and, in recent years, the NCIS television series. He loved baseball and was a lifetime Yankee fan.

Skip took care of people by taking care of things. He had a vivid memory and a vast understanding of the working world. He was mechanically inclined and could fix or build almost anything.

Having spent many summer days of his youth on the Atlantic shoreline, Skip loved the sun and cherished family vacations that brought him back to the beach. He enjoyed Florida and often talked of retiring there. He was at home near the ocean.

He is survived by his wife of 44 years, Deborah (Nelson) Rucinski; daughters, Shannon (John) Torrance; Michelle (Tim) Jacobson, Jennifer (Tom) Bryan; son, Michael (Holly Forbes) Rucinski; grandchildren ("The Fabulous Eight"), William, Nolan, Ella, Campbell, Michael, Jack, Oliver and Edith; sister, Lori Ann (Rucinski) Boner; sister-in-law, Diane Martin; and brother-in-law, Dennis (Helen) Nelson.

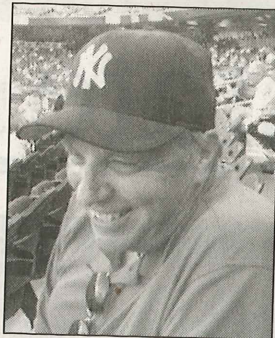
He is preceded in death by his parents.

In lieu of flowers, family requests memorial donations to Altru Health System-Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU).

A celebration of life will be held at 7:00 p.m. Wednesday, January 23 (23 was Skip's favorite number), at Amundson Funeral Home in Grand Forks.

Visitation will be from 5:00-7:00 p.m. prior to the service at Amundson's.

A guestbook may be signed at www.amundsonfuneral-home.com



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prepared by the residents of Summit, N.D., on Sunday. The fans stayed overnight.

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Papa's Airport

GF airport to name new maintenance building in honor of longtime employee Skip Rucinski, who passed away in January

By Brandi Jewett
Herald Staff Writer

It wasn't an uncommon occurrence to see a child riding shotgun in truck No. 9 as it made its rounds at the Grand Forks International Airport.

During his 43-year career in airport maintenance, Stephen "Skip" Rucinski gave his children — and eventually grandchildren — plenty of tours of the facility, which they referred to as "Papa's Airport."

"He was like a little boy when he was driving those kids around," said Deborah Rucinski, Skip's wife of 44 years.

Though the truck was designated No. 9, Skip's favorite number was, in fact, 23. It was only fitting his family held his celebration of life Jan. 23 after he passed away in the early morning of Jan. 19 at age 66. Doctors suspect a blood clot that formed in his leg had traveled to his heart and lungs.

He left behind his wife, four children, eight grandchildren, many friends and Papa's Airport.

"Skip took a lot of pride in the airport," said Jerry Aase, a coworker of 38 years.

After his death, the Grand Forks Airport Authority approved naming the facility's new maintenance building for Rucinski.

Skip passed away on a Saturday, and by that Monday morning, Patrick Dame, the airport's executive director, had three employees ask if the building could be named for Rucinski.

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Stephen "Skip" Rucinski

I had no idea he knew so many people and had such an impact on their lives. He was a very special man."

Deborah Rucinski

Wife of Skip Rucinski, who died in January

MENTAL HEALTH

Trying to break patterns

Police and emergency rooms aren't the places to meet all the needs of those afflicted

By Patrick Springer
Forum News Service

FARGO — West Fargo, N.D., police had repeated encounters with a man whose mental illness caused him to cycle in and out of custody and treatment.

Over a recent 18-month period, officers dealt with him 24 times. The longest gaps were periods when he was hospitalized or in treatment.

Because of his poorly regulated mental condition, his physical health deteriorated over time and now the man, who is in his 40s, is in a nursing home.

Although an extreme case, there probably are several thousand people in Cass County with mental illness or chemical dependency who repeatedly must be dealt with by police officers, jailers and emergency room staff, according to a senior police official in West Fargo who serves on a task force dealing with the problem.

Police often become involved when family or friends don't know where else to turn, said Mike Reitan, assistant chief of police in West Fargo.

"As a last resort, they call the police department because they don't know who else to call," he said, adding that officers know some of

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"We think this is an honor that no one else could achieve out here," Dame said.

The city boy

While those who knew him say he did not embrace change, Skip saw much of it during his nearly half-century career at the airport.

His position titles changed from lineboy to airfield attendant to maintenance professional. Skip watched the airport's original terminal evolve and eventually be replaced by the new Byron Dorgan terminal. He also saw the aftermath of Sept. 11 ripple through the aviation community.

Through all the changes, his love for his job remained, Deborah said.

"He had opportunities to go other places," she said Jan. 28 in the kitchen of the home the couple shared for 38 years. "But he wanted to stay here."

Originally from Newark, N.J., enlisting in the U.S. Air Force brought Skip to Grand Forks. A city boy at heart, the quiet of North Dakota took some getting used to, Deborah and coworkers said.

"He got off the train and looked down one direction and saw nobody then looked down the other direction and saw nobody," said Rick Wockovich, who worked with Skip for 35 years. "Then he said 'Where the hell am I?'"

From 1967 to 1970, Skip served as a helicopter mechanic and crew chief. He joined the airport in 1970 and never left, though he was quietly planning to retire on March 14, 2014.

Lifetime love

Deborah met Skip in August of '67 when she happened upon him and his friends playing football.

"We talked a little bit, but then I didn't see him for awhile," she said. After a trip home to New Jersey, Skip reappeared a month later with a 1964 Pontiac GTO. The car — like all the vehicles the couple would eventually purchase — was kept immaculate.

Deborah says she didn't ride in it for fear of spilling something. Instead, she and Skip walked everywhere until the winter cold chased them into the Pontiac.

"The first place we went in his car I spilled root beer all over," Deborah said, smiling at the memory.

It was one of many memories she shared with the love

of her life, a man she considered perfect for her. Deborah says she was treated like a princess. In their 44 years, she estimated Skip didn't open her car door for her perhaps but six times.

When she began a new job several weeks ago, he began setting out everything she would need for her morning routine including her hairbrush, breakfast and pills.

"I forgot to take my pills for two days after he passed," Deborah said. "It's crazy how much you can come to rely on someone. I still have trouble remembering the pills."

Often, tears flooded her eyes when she spoke about her husband, but Deborah comforted herself by patting her right arm — the place where Skip's hand would fall when his arm was around her.

"Most women wouldn't believe me," she said. "But he did positively, absolutely everything he could to make my life better."

Wealth of knowledge

Skip brought the mentality of making things better to the airport, as well, according to coworkers.

"If you messed up, nine times out of 10, he wouldn't get mad at you, but he'd never let you forget," coworker Lee DeLisle said. "And he always had us thinking about how we could do better."

Skip's extensive knowledge seemed to cover every aspect of the job, whether it was fixing equipment, clearing snow or painting the miles of lines on the airport's roads and runways. Coworkers say he walked thousands of miles painting those lines before the airport purchased a drivable painting machine.

"He resisted getting a rider, but once we got it, he thought it was the best thing since sliced bread," coworker Coleen Peterson said.

Staff members say Skip's mechanical expertise earned him the respect of both airport employees and contractors, who would often ask for his advice.

"He was around for over 40 years," Scott Nelson, who worked with Skip for 23 years, said. "He knew what worked and what didn't work."

Rucinski was well-respected, and not just by those at the airport. That was something his family realized after his death when more than 100 sympathy cards arrived at the Rucinski home, some from people Deborah knew and others she did not.

"I had no idea he knew so many people and had such an impact on their lives," she said while blotting her eye with a worn tissue. "He was a very special man."

Call Jewett at (701) 780-1108; (800) 477-6572, ext. 1108; or send email to bjewett@gfherald.com.



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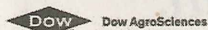
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