*Look around for extraordinary role models*

This week, five outstanding individuals were inducted into the Beloit Historical Society’s Hall of Fame.

They are Arnie Lee, Dave Luebke, Tim McKearn, Bev Melton and Rick West.

Four are deceased – Luebke, McKearn, Lee and Melton.

I had met Bev Melton. I am aware of some of her good works, but our paths crossed sparingly. I have no doubt, though, that she accomplished much and well deserved the honor of induction.

Rick West has been a colleague in the communications business for many years. His voice, if not his face, has been instantly recognizable across the Stateline Area for his radio career and beyond. Beloit has had no better booster of its civic life.

Today, though, I want to write about three of Beloit’s best who have moved on to the next plane, and whose contributions I know first-hand. Greatness is all around us, if we only look.

That’s one of the many side benefits of a life spent in journalism, in which reporters and editors interact regularly with difference-makers. We see not only their works, but also their spirit and commitment, because we are privileged to see them as people, not just newsmakers.

Over decades of observing public education, I’ve never witnessed anyone with a deeper commitment to kids than Arnie Lee. He did it all, at one time or another. Teacher. Administrator. Superintendent. Board member. Valued, volunteer adviser. He worked in public to improve schools. And he worked behind the scenes to press for improvements.

Long after what should have been a comfortable and relaxing retirement, Arnie monitored the Beloit district and looked for ways to make it better. In fact, now that he’s passed, I can tell a tale. Often, when the paper was trying to understand what was going on in education, and how we could find more facts, I would call Arnie for a confidential talk. I could always count on two things: (1) He was an expert, and (2) he always had the kids’ best interest in mind. Arnie had no personal ax to grind. He had no grudges, no scores to settle. He just wanted kids to have access to a better education.

Tim McKearn couldn’t say no. Whenever a job needed doing, Beloit could count on Tim lining up to help. He was an educator, an adviser, a businessman, a consultant and more during his career. He was good at everything. Dozens of local organizations benefited from Tim’s can-do attitude and willingness to work.

I had various opportunities to work with Tim over the years. One in particular comes to mind – it also involves Tim’s fellow posthumous inductee, Dave Luebke – and that’s the effort a few years ago to set up a special event to honor Vietnam’s often-forgotten veterans. The event took place in conjunction with Beloit’s Fourth of July celebration. Scores of veterans came forward, to receive a special commemorative medal and accept the cheers of a large crowd. Dave provided the vision, and several of us helped in one way or another. Tim, as usual, was among the strongest supporters, for no reason other than it was the right thing to do.

I’ll always remember him for this, too. He may have been the biggest defender of solid, fact-based journalism in the region. When we dug deep, reported inconvenient truths and stirred controversies, social media tended to light up with outrage toward the messenger. Over and over, Tim would post to remind people that good journalism was about telling the truth, not hiding it or sugarcoating it. Tim’s comments came from his big heart and his equally big brain. It was appreciated.

One of the first people I met when I came to Wisconsin to work was Dave Luebke. We hit it off from the beginning. We even played together on a championship City League basketball team.

He was a leader. As an educator, he touched the lives of thousands, many of whom expressed what Dave meant to them when he passed. He returned over and over to answer the call when Beloit schools needed help.

He served the community exceptionally well as an elected member of the Beloit City Council, including as its president. With Dave, it was never about him. He listened far more than he talked. He tried to understand everyone’s position and make decisions with fairness and sensitivity for all. He was a healer, always working hard to bridge differences and bring people together.

Dave was a visionary, and regularly came up with ideas – like the Vietnam veterans event – intended to make lives better.

One last story: My wife Stephanie and I nominated her mom and dad, the late Fred Klett and his wife, Joanne, for the Hall. I worked with Dave, a member of the selection committee, to make sure we submitted the nomination in proper form. Fred and Joanne passed the test and were chosen, but the pandemic threatened to prevent convening a public event to recognize them and other inductees of that particular class. So I asked Dave, and he agreed, to show up as a surprise at a Klett family event and present Joanne with the selection. It’s a family memory that will last for generations.

Let me repeat, I have nothing but respect for Rick West and Bev Melton.

Dave, Tim and Arnie, though, touched this old editor’s heart time after time. For others out there who may aspire to live the kind of life that merits a Hall of Fame induction, look no further for role models.

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