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Community

Alan Axelrod, community builder, dies at 52

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WARWICK — The quiet benevolence of Alan Axelrod was remembered across Rhode Island this week. Many organizations large and small remembered his passionate dedication with fondness, and friends and colleagues recalled him as being equal parts “gentleman” and “scholar.” He died Nov. 2 after a battle with cancer.

At Temple Beth-El, Rabbi Leslie Gutterman eulogized Axelrod as a man of “faith, family and friends,” who “wore the crown of a good name.”

Friends praised him for his boundless energy and dedication, even during his final days. He moved through countless non-profit and fundraising circles, both as a professional and a volunteer, trying to secure the funds, the labor and the “buy-in” to advance a plethora of social and humanitarian causes.

“There was something about his character and basic goodness that people recognized and respected,” said Paul Witham, associate vice president for development at the University of Rhode Island, where Axelrod had worked for seven years.

Colleagues at the United Way, where he once worked, were in tears when the news hit.

“He really believed that people are here to help other

people,” said Mary Jane Silva, vice president of resource development.

Axelrod loved the idea of community service, of making groups of people safer, more connected and more enfranchised. He worked in the inter-faith community, trying to find common ground on social issues, and with the Latino-Jewish Alliance to create new partnerships.

He took pleasure in working on both the “big picture” and the “hands on” levels. For example, he helped generate support from the Jewish community for a Habitat for Humanity homebuilding project in Olneyville. He’d also champion the affordable housing initiative through his work at the Community Relations Council (CRC) at the Jewish Federation, and then he’d work to feed the homeless through the Social Action Committee at Beth-El.

A skilled writer with great stores of knowledge, he wrote many erudite pieces to the Providence Journal and the Jewish Voice & Herald in support of Israel. As a member of the Voice’s editorial board, in his final weeks he penned a book review and asked for more work. “It’s the only way I now have to connect to the Jewish community,” he said to the editor.

He was very serious-minded, but his compassion and graciousness always put people at ease. He had a dry sense of humor, and his smile and kind features could inject levity into a tense meeting.



Alan Axelrod

“He liked everybody no matter who you were and where you came from,” a friend said.

He enjoyed nature and loved to sail and garden.

Peri Ann Aptaker worked with Axelrod on the Planned Giving Council of Rhode Island, where he served as president last year. She said he was positive and an unpretentious sort of man, very down to earth.

“Alan was an all-around nice guy — there aren’t a lot of them around,” she said.

“By doing all that good work, he was leaving his own legacy.”

See obituary, page 26.