Micale fought for lake, loved music

By Jeff Brown
Special to the Reporter

Lake Koshkonong and all who love to boat, fish and swim there lost a champion last week with the passing of Sumner Town Board Supervisor Frank C. Micale (Mih-KAH'-lee), Jr.

Micale died suddenly of a heart attack on Thursday night, Jan. 15. He was 63 years old.

Son of the lake

Micale was born in 1952 in Milwaukee.

When Micale was seven years old, his parents, Ione and Frank Micale, Sr., bought the Sunset Lodge Tavern, located on the north shore of Lake Koshkonong. The family moved into a house near the tavern on High Ridge Road in the Town of Sumner.

As a teenager, Micale worked at the tavern, slaking the thirsts of boaters and snowmobilers and serving up the home-made pizzas for which the tavern was famous.

Micale was hired as a Jefferson County Circuit Court bailiff in 1983, but he continued to pitch in at the tavern until his parents sold it in 1993. Micale lived in the house on High Ridge Road until he died.

Beating the dam-busters

All who knew Micale well say he had a passion for Lake Koshkonong and the issues affecting it, a passion that often drove him to take action.

In the mid-1990s, officials from the state Department of Natural Resources inspected the Indianford dam and told officials from Rock County, which owned the dam, that the county would have to pay for upgrades to the dam or remove it.

The dam, built in 1851 and re-

built in 1917, regulates the flow of the Rock River and turned what was once a vast marsh filled with wild rice and flocks of ducks into Wisconsin's eighth-largest lake, creating a haven for boaters and anglers.

County officials signaled they were ready to remove the dam rather than pay for the upgrades.

Many of the 2,700 people who own land within a half-mile of Lake Koshkonong's 27 miles of shoreland were outraged, and flooded Jefferson and Rock County board of supervisors meetings to voice their opposition.

"Landowners said 'You can't do that that to us—you take out the dam and we're going to be living in a deep-water swamp," said Barbara McGann, who served as Sumner town clerk from 2009 to 2014.

According to McGann, Micale led the charge against removing the dam and did so with verve and eloquence.

"He could be very persuasive—he was a great debater," McGann said. "They finally pulled in their horns and actually put up some money toward funding the dam."

Founded lake district

The county relented in large part because Micale and Jim Folk took the lead in circulating a petition, organizing meetings, and filing the paperwork necessary to form the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District in 1999. The lake district is a public entity that manages Lake Kosh-konong and provides services to landowners around the lake.

"They're the ones who sat down and pressured the leadership of the two county boards on 'If this dam is removed, this is the property-tax base you will lose from shoreland property owners,'" said Brian Christianson, chairman of the Rock-Koshkonong Lake District Board of Commissioners.

Sumner Town Board Supervisor Frank Micale, Jr. fought to make Lake Koshkonong a better place. Micale, who grew up on the lake's north shore, died last week at age 63. (Photo submitted by Missy Defebaugh)

Micale served several terms on the lake district's board of commissioners; he also served on the Rock River Safety Patrol board of commissioners.

Christianson said Micale continued to be a strong supporter of the lake district after his time on the lake district's board of commissioners was over, and said Micale commanded such respect that he could sway opinion on controversial issues at the lake district's annual meetings simply by standing and speaking his piece.

"He completely transferred his credibility over to the lake district and changed public opinion within minutes," Christianson said.

Micale was also a founding member of the Rock River-Koshkonong

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Micale, champion for Lake Koshkonong,

Association, a private association that raises money for projects to improve the lake. For years, the association organized an annual ice fishing derby and held an annual dinner to raise money for the Bark River Fish Hatchery, which is located just north of Lake Koshkonong.

"Frank would go around to all of the different sporting goods stores and get guns donated, get tackle boxes donated, fishing poles," Christianson said. "He's done it for years and years at the Red Apple and then Culvers."

"It was hard to get a ticket because they sold out every year—cars were parked not only at the Red Apple, but all the way down to the Anchor Inn," Christianson said. "It was a jam-packed, 'had-to-be-at' event and Frank was the emcee," said Christianson.

The mayor of north shore

In 2008, Micale won election to the Sumner Town Board.

Sumner Town Chairman John Dohner said Micale worked well with his fellow supervisors and was guided in policy decisions by a deep and abiding knowledge of issues affecting people who live along the lake's north shore.

"Frank was a team player," Dohner said. "I always like to refer to him as the mayor of north shore."

When historic floods struck in 2008 and 2013, Dohner said Micale was instrumental in persuading the Federal Emergency Management Agency to repair roads in the north shore area.

Dohner said Micale's expertise was invaluable.

"The people off the north shore's issues are going to be different than the people who live outside Busseyville," Dohner said. "It's good to have a diverse board with people from different areas of the township to bring forth each area's needs. When you lose that expertise, that's tough."

Sumner Town Clerk Glendan Rewoldt concurred with Dohner and said Micale was a conscientious public servant.

"He always knew that you're an elected official and you need to make a decision based on what is good for all the people, not just some of the people," Rewoldt said.

Jefferson County Supervisor Walt Christensen, whose district included the Town of Sumner, said Micale was "very knowledgeable about lake issues and was not afraid of drilling people like me from the county on what we should be doing to improve the situation for residents on the lake."

Christensen said Micale's forceful advocacy on behalf of those who lived on the lake and those who vacationed along its shores was rare.

"We're going to miss him—you don't always find somebody who is willing to spend the time and learn the issues, then get to meetings to push forward with what he felt was the right thing to do," Christensen said.

Free-wheeling Frank

Micale's life stretched beyond the shores of Lake Koshkonong, however.

Missy Defebaugh, Micale's girlfriend, said he loved to ride his trike,

remembered

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a three-wheeled motorcycle

"We did a lot of riding," Defebaugh said. "We did several 100-mile marathons for fundraisers."

Micale was also a die-hard Badgers and Packers fan.

"He loved Badgers football games and Badger men's hockey games," Defebaugh said. "He was a hockey season ticket holder for 18 years—we went to all the home games. There's one this week, but I'm not sure I can bring myself to go."

Defebaugh said she met Micale shortly after his parents sold the Sunset Lodge Tavern.

"I was singing in a duo back then and the new owner had hired us to perform there and Frank was there, and that's how I met him," Defebaugh said.

The two hit it off and eventually became best friends.

Crowd-pleasing crooner

Defebaugh and Micale were also band mates, splitting lead vocals in Swingin' Company B, a 16-piece swing band.

Defebaugh founded the band as a tribute to her father and mother, who met at a USO dance while her father was serving as lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army during the Korean War.

Micale had a beautiful tenor voice, said Defebaugh.

"You did not expect that voice to come out of that man," Defebaugh said. "He was a big man and people expected him to be a baritone."

Romance blossomed after Micale and Defebaugh began dating in 2010. The two often sang karaoke at The Mink Farm Tavern in Cambridge, where Micale was a crowd favorite.

"When Frank would walk in, people had all kind of requests," Defebaugh said. "He would sing everything from big band to country. He was really good at the oldies from the 1950s and 1960s, but he could sing anything."

"My personal favorite was 'Ain't That a Kick in the Head,' by Dean Martin," Defebaugh said. "However, he got a huge rise out of the crowd every time he sang 'Minnie the Moocher.'"

"He was the love of my life, he was my best friend," Defebaugh said. "That's what's been the hardest part for me."

The name game

Defebaugh said she took Micale to The Fireside in Fort Atkinson to celebrate his birthday the week before he died. The featured attraction was a 1970s musical revue, and Defebaugh arranged to have Micale's birthday announced from the stage.

As usual, said Defebaugh, the announcer mangled Micale's last name, which was Sicilian, by pronouncing it like "McHale."

"I would tease him about it," Defebaugh said. "I said, 'Well, get ready to stand up Mr. McHale, be-cause they're about to announce your birthday.'"

Defebaugh said the improvements made to Lake Koshkonong under Micale's watch and his love for life are his legacy.

"Frank Micale has forgotten more about this lake than anybody will ever know. He was very proud. You never met anybody like Frank—he was amazing."