

Skartados recalled for loving to help people

Paul Brooks

Our Picks

By [Paul Brooks](#)

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MARLBORO – Claudette Hennessy stood in the funeral home hallway, perusing the signatures of those who, like her, came to say goodbye to her former assemblyman, Frank Skartados.

It was a little after 2 p.m. Thursday, and the initial knot of dignitaries, friends and simple well-wishers had filed past Skartados' open casket, shaken hands with his family and close advisers and offered halting, tearful condolences. Some gathered in a side room to watch a 36-minute video of Skartados, smiling, hugging the people he served, cutting ribbons, braving a pie-eating contest, marching in parades, working with kids.

Hennessy sat in an ornate chair in the alcove across the hall. There was much more to Skartados, she said. He brought home grants to help the communities in his district learn and grow and build.

“He was very friendly and open, a fine man who really stands out these days,” she said. “He was an example of what a politician should be. It is a shame to lose him.”

Skartados died of pancreatic cancer on Sunday at 62, bringing an end to a life that stretched from birth in Greece to the United States at the age of 14, to New York state's 104th District Assembly seat. In-between he earned multiple degrees, worked with the United Nations, owned clubs in Poughkeepsie, ran a farm in Milton and had a family.

“At a time when immigration is such a fraught issue, someone coming from overseas as a teen, not knowing English, and succeeding in public education, going to graduate school and winning an Assembly seat, that is a great story,” Gerald Benjamin said in a phone interview. He was a mentor to Skartados at SUNY New Paltz, where Skartados earned one of his degrees. He later got a master's degree in international studies from the State University of California at Sacramento.

It all seemed to fit with his district, which included the cities of Newburgh, Poughkeepsie and Beacon, the suburban Town of Newburgh and the farming

communities of Lloyd and Marlborough.

“It’s a unique district,” said Christopher Whitson, a longtime aide to Skartados. “He would tell the story of coming here in a plane and seeing the majesty of the Hudson Valley, and that he wished he could just take a part of that back to Greece for his family.”

Vivian Vaz, a sister-in-law to Skartados, said he was someone others in the family sought out for advice.

“He loved to help. He was always there for everyone,” she said.

That drive kept him going even in the hospital as he lay dying, she said.

“He said, ‘I am not ready to go. I have so many plans for my community.’ ”

Additional calling hours for Skartados will be held from 2-4 p.m. and 6-8 p.m. Friday, followed by a private prayer ceremony for family and close friends.

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