

Marlene and Darwin Stepanek

Marlene and Darwin Stepanek received their angel wings on Wednesday, October 28, 2020, and Thursday, October 29, 2020, respectively, at University of Iowa Hospitals in Iowa City, Iowa.

A private family funeral mass will be held on Thursday, November 5, 2020, at St. Mary Catholic Church in Grinnell with Fr. Ross Epping presiding. They will be interred together at St. Joseph Cemetery in Chelsea, Iowa. The service will be live-streamed on the Smith Funeral Home Facebook page at www.facebook.com/SmithFuneralHomeCremationService beginning at 9:45 a.m.



A public visitation with the family present will be held from 2:00 p.m. until 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday, November 4, at the Smith Funeral Home in Grinnell. A face mask will be required for those in attendance. In lieu of flowers, memorials may be designated to the Darwin and Marlene Stepanek Memorial Fund, to benefit local organizations selected by their daughters, and mailed in care of the Smith Funeral Home, PO Box 368, Grinnell, Iowa 50112. Their daughters encourage friends and community members to share a funny memory of their parents at www.smithfh.com to lift their spirits at this difficult time.

Marlene Jean Behounek was born the daughter of Wesley Charles Behounek and Hazel Marie (Davis) Behounek on April 11, 1951, in Marshalltown, Iowa. She was raised on the family farm near Chelsea, Iowa, and graduated from Belle Plaine High School in Belle Plaine, Iowa, in 1969. She received her nursing degree from Marshalltown Community College in Marshalltown, Iowa, in 1972.

Darwin Duane Stepanek was born the son of Charles Joseph Stepanek and Mildred Helen (Nekola) Stepanek on February 19, 1955, in Toledo, Iowa. He was raised near Grinnell and graduated from Grinnell High School in 1973.

Darwin and Marlene were united in marriage on September 6, 1975, at St. Joseph Catholic Church in Chelsea. They were blessed with three daughters, Dara, Darcia and Doria. They lived in Grinnell all of their married lives. Darwin was a truck driver for Golden Sun Feeds in Grinnell for many years and hauled Budweiser for JB Hunt. Marlene was a longtime nurse at Grinnell Regional Medical Center. They moved to northern California in 2009 and Marlene worked as a traveling nurse. In 2016 they moved back to Grinnell to be closer to their girls and grandchildren. They were members of St. Mary Catholic Church in Grinnell.

Darwin and Marlene cherished every moment they had with their grandchildren and children and loved the family trips they took together. Their marriage was one of dedication, strength, kindness, and was fun-filled. They balanced each other in so many ways: Darwin being more outgoing, spontaneous, and free-spirited to Marlene being more easygoing, modest, and being the voice of reason. Darwin's enjoyments were deer hunting, mushroom hunting, fishing, tinkering in his man shed, and Sunday morning "church sessions" held with his friends. He will be remembered for his signature smirk/smile, for his sense of humor, for being a great friend to many, and for being strong-willed. Marlene's enjoyments were reading romance novels, going to visit the family farm near Chelsea, landscaping and mowing, baking, watching PBR rodeos on TV with Darwin, and her uninterrupted time watching the Hallmark Channel on TV. She will be remembered as Grinnell's Mother Teresa, one who provided loving care to so many patients at Grinnell Regional Medical Center, for her gentle and kind way, giving nature, and for her famous quote, "Oh Darwin." They have left many with an everlasting memory of good times, love, hope, and strength.

Darwin and Marlene are survived by their daughters, Dara (Brendan) Knudtson, and their children Carlie and Dalen, of Postville, Iowa, Darcia Stepanek of Grinnell, and Doria (Brandon Cranston) Stepanek, and their children, Memphis, Savannah and Jackson, of Grinnell. Darwin's siblings, Charlie (Mary) Stepanek of Grinnell, Rick (Kris) Stepanek of Grinnell, Kevin Stepanek of Newton, Iowa, and Ron (Amy) Stepanek of Yale, Iowa; Marlene's siblings, Carol Behounek of Chelsea, Steve Behounek of Chelsea, and Mary (Jeff) Crawford of Altoona, Iowa; and many nieces and nephews. They were preceded in death by their parents.

CHR 11-2-2020

Tragic fire claims two lives, raises ambulance questions

64R 11-2-2020

The catastrophic Oct. 24 fire and explosion at a rural home southwest of Grinnell has claimed the lives of both residents of the home, Darwin and Marlene Stepanek. The Stepaneks began receiving medical attention eight minutes after the dispatch announcing victims at the scene went out, and an ambulance arrived at the scene 14 minutes after the dispatch about victims.

The Poweshiek County dispatch center log shows that the Grinnell Fire Department was dispatched at 10:46 a.m. on Saturday, Oct. 24, to 4345 20th St. the address of the home of Darwin

and Marlene Stepanek about 1.5 miles south of the interstate and about one mile west of Grinnell Mutual. The Stepanek home is on the east side of 20th St., 6.6 road miles from Grinnell's public safety building.

Harold McNaul lives on the property north of the Stepanek home and owns property on the west side of the road. He was working in a tractor on the land west of 20th, and his son Scott, a Jasper County resident, was hunting

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on McNaul land also on the west side at 10:46 a.m. when both noticed black smoke billowing up from the southeast corner of the Stepanek home. They called 911 to report the fire, then both started toward the home, Harold in his tractor and Scott in a pick-up.

According to Harold McNaul, he at first thought the smoke was from a burn pile of the Stepaneks but, as he drove and watched, he realized the smoke was far too near the house to be a burn pile. Almost immediately he saw flames spreading rapidly along the south wall of the house and, shortly thereafter, windows on the house's north side blew out and flames shot out of the windows. McNaul then saw the garage door opening and realized there were people in the home.

He called his wife to make a second 911 call to report there were potentially fire victims. The county dispatcher broadcast that call at 10:48 a.m., two minutes after the initial dispatch.

Scott arrived at the home before Harold who could see a person he later learned was Marlene Stepanek standing outside the garage door. Scott disappeared into the garage as Harold pulled up, and he could hear Scott shouting that he needed help in the garage. McNaul knew that Darwin had severe back trouble. Darwin on his hands and knees was calling for help, McNaul says, and saying he hurt too much to go further.

As McNaul arrived he could hear Scott urging Darwin forward and pulling him toward the door, saying they had to get out and away from a pick-up parked in the garage with a full gas tank. McNaul and his son got Darwin 12 to 15 feet outside the garage when

an explosion inside the house knocked Scott three or four yards forward. McNaul, still holding onto Darwin, urged his son to continue helping, and the two got Darwin further away from the home and into the grass.

McNaul had noted that the clothing and hair of both Stepaneks had been burned away by the fire. As soon as Darwin was at a safe distance, McNaul gave Marlene a sweatshirt to wrap around herself. McNaul then called neighbor John Thompson who with his son Shane brought a four-wheeler to the scene, and the neighbors helped both Darwin and Marlene into the vehicle which was then driven down to 20th St. to wait for the ambulance.

Both Stepaneks were in pain from significant burns, McNaul says, adding he is glad he and his son were both outside and nearby. Marlene told McNaul there were blankets in a car in their shed, asking him to bring them. As McNaul exited the shed with the blankets, there were two more explosions on the east side of the house. The explosions, he says, blew contents of the house, including two-by-fours, into the yard, fortunately not hitting anyone. What remains of the house, he says, are its concrete walls.

Two Grinnell fire trucks according to the county dispatch center log arrived at 10:56 a.m., ten minutes after the initial call and eight minutes after the notification of burn victims at the scene. Two Grinnell firefighters, Chief Dan Sicard and volunteer Brian Paul, both licensed emergency medical technicians (EMTs), began tending to the Stepaneks with medical supplies in the fire trucks while other firefighters focused on the fire.

The first two fire trucks were driven by firefighters on duty in the fire station. Two more Grinnell fire trucks arrived at 11:00 a.m., four minutes after the

first two trucks, driven by volunteers who had to get to the station before starting for the fire. Two minutes after that, at 11:02 a.m. according to the county dispatch log, an East Poweshiek Ambulance Service vehicle arrived at the scene.

The East Poweshiek ambulance crew took over care, prepared the Stepaneks for transport to the Grinnell hospital, and left the scene at 11:11 a.m. The ambulance arrived at the hospital at 11:22 a.m., making an 11-minute trip from scene to hospital.

By 11:36 a.m. two air-flight helicopters from Iowa City were at the Grinnell hospital to take both Stepaneks to the University of Iowa burn treatment center. Marlene Stepanek died of her injuries on Wednesday, Oct. 28, and Darwin Stepanek died of his injuries on Thursday, Oct. 29.

Grinnell Fire Chief Dan Sicard says the home was a total loss with an estimated value of \$250,000. Cause of the fire has not yet been determined and is under investigation by the state fire marshal's office, the Poweshiek County Sheriff's Office, the Grinnell Fire Department and insurance company investigators. Sicard noted the cause is not believed to be a criminal act, but one that will take time to determine.

Grinnell City Manager Russ Behrens says he has been told by citizens that they understand it took an ambulance half an hour to arrive at the fire scene. He points to county dispatch records showing that the first EMTs arrived in eight minutes from the dispatch announcing victims and that the East Poweshiek ambulance was at the scene six minutes after the first fire trucks arrived.

Behrens explains that ambulance service in Grinnell and the surrounding townships is provided by Midwest

Ambulance under a contract signed earlier this year. Under the contract Midwest provides a fully-equipped, fully-staffed ambulance in the Grinnell public safety building around the clock, referred to as the first-out ambulance.

Midwest under the contract also provides a second fully-equipped ambulance at the public safety building and pledged to work with the city to accomplish staffing of that ambulance, known as the second-out ambulance. Grinnell proposed to staff the second-out ambulance with firefighter EMTs for a fee of \$75 per call which Midwest could recover as part of its fee to the patient for service.

At the time of the Oct. 24 fire, Midwest had not yet responded to the city's proposal. The first-out ambulance was already on another medical call when the call for an ambulance at the Stepanek residence arrived.

Behrens explains that, in that situation, Grinnell requests what is known as mutual aid from sister ambulance services, the system through which first responder agencies help each other when local resources are insufficient. Behrens notes that Grinnell was "extremely fortunate" that an ambulance from a sister service, East Poweshiek, had just completed delivering a patient to the Grinnell hospital and was available to respond.

He notes that the Kellogg, Lynnville, Searsboro and Sully fire departments also responded to requests for mutual aid, arriving at the fire scene to bring water in tankers to the fire scene.

Behrens comments that the East Poweshiek ambulance arrived at the scene 14 minutes after the dispatch about victims and traveled from the scene to the hospital in 11 minutes, roughly comparable times.

He also notes that the second-out

ambulance in Grinnell, unlike the first-out, will not be staffed full-time as the first-out ambulance is. Assuming Midwest agrees with the city proposal, the second-out ambulance, like those of sister services in Brooklyn and Montezuma, will have to be driven and staffed by crew members who first need to get to the ambulance from wherever they happen to be.

That staffing by volunteers is like staffing of Grinnell fire trucks beyond those driven by full-time firefighters in the fire station according to Behrens. The volunteers must first get to the fire station, then drive the fire truck to the scene. Two Grinnell fire trucks were driven to the Oct. 24 fire by volunteers and arrived at the scene four minutes after the trucks driven by full-time firefighters and two minutes before the East Poweshiek ambulance.

"It's geography. Ten minutes is an exceptional response time for fire trucks to arrive at that scene," says Behrens of the 6.6-mile distance from the public safety building to the Stepanek residence and the arrival time of the fire trucks driven by full-time Grinnell firefighters.

Behrens adds that he knows response times always seem extremely long to those in pain and to those providing help and support to them.

"We caught a break that East Poweshiek was here in town or the delay would have been much longer," he notes. "But, if people believe these response times aren't acceptable, then we need to come up with a completely different system. Grinnell cannot provide service to these townships and get there any quicker than this."

Possible approval of an amended agreement with Midwest Ambulance covering staffing of the second-out ambulance is on the Grinnell City Council agenda for its Nov. 2 meeting.