

Once-in-a-lifetime friend, once-in-a-lifetime man: Gary Spies leaves immeasurable impact on Fergus Falls community

By Karrie Carlson, Daily Journal Media, Jan. 18, 2025

While in the checkout line at almost any store in Fergus Falls, one could turn around and ask the person behind them if they knew Gary Spies. Not only would the answer almost always be "yes," but it would generally include a story about how he touched their life in some way.

There is no denying that the impact made by Spies is immeasurable. The obvious connection to the community is Spies' ownership of Service Food; but the time, resources, passion and dedication Spies had for Fergus Falls reaches far beyond the four walls of a local grocery store.

Longtime friend John MacFarlane described Spies as someone who was always interested in what was good for the community. "If a kid came to him and needed help for a project, he always gave them something. It's just the kind of man he was. He had a community spirit and wanted to see these kids succeed."

Spies had a hand in many of the businesses that keep Fergus Falls' economy thriving. He was involved in fundraising, donating and promoting many local projects, including the Community Ice Arena, Otter Cove Children's Museum, Splash Pad, Habitat for Humanity, YMCA, M State, Apple Tree Dental, Lake Region Healthcare and LRH Cancer Care and Research Center.

MacFarlane said that when Fergus Falls was hurting in the 1970s, after Medallion Kitchen burned down and a cotton saw business left town, leaving many unemployed, Spies was part of Project 500, which brought 500 jobs to the community. "He was on the board and gave many hours to that, and it was quite successful." Quality Circuits, Shoremaster and West Tool are just a few of the large employers that resulted from that effort.

For every project Spies was publicly involved in, there were hundreds of acts of kindness he did in private. His generosity has put people through school, provided housing to those in need and given jobs and second chances to those who saw little hope — he saw it in them.

There is so much of the Fergus Falls community that has a little touch of Spies' legacy. He and his good friend, George Zender, were the original owners of Mable Murphy's, the community staple restaurant and bar adding a little Irish flair to the area. Spies was also instrumental in the housing development behind the mall, along with attorney Robert Sefkow.

MacFarlane will miss the standing Tuesday morning breakfast plans he and Spies have held for the past 25 years. MacFarlane said, "He was slow to anger. In fact I don't remember when I saw him upset about something." He added that Spies was a once-in-a-lifetime friend who saw potential and hope in everything and everyone.

With his passing, the community of Fergus Falls has lost its biggest champion, but his legacy will remain.

Spies died on Jan. 11, 2025, at the age of 82, and the community of Fergus Falls has lost a man who championed for his hometown. His legacy, however, will always remain, firmly cemented in the heart of downtown at Spies Riverfront Park and Market Pavilion, in the histories of so many community initiatives, and in the nooks and crannies that no one even knows about.

As of Jan. 15, the fire at Our Lady Victory Catholic Church on Jan. 14 halted Spies' funeral arrangements, which are pending at this time. Updates will be made online at olsonfuneralhome.com.