

TRIBUTE

John Swanson '83: 'The Best of Us'

On February 1, a group of 30 gathered on Central Park West. Among them were four former *Campus Times* editors in chief from the early 1980s, when the paper was a daily—along with fellow CT editors and friends. They were there to honor a person who—as one attendee said—“was the best of us.”

John (Swanee) Swanson '83 died in January in New York City at age 52, from cancer. He was many things: a reporter and editor; a baseball player and coach; a rock and roll connoisseur; and an expert in windows and doors. He was a husband to Lee Burnley '83, a father to daughter Ellen '16 and son Harry, and a friend to countless others, not only fellow alumni, but also parents at pools and baseball fields, colleagues in the building trades industry, and parishioners at church.

I met Swanee in Burton Hall the first day of our freshman year in 1979. We bonded over our *Campus Times* and Bruce Springsteen. In our sophomore year we joined other UR students (including Swanee's future wife, Lee) to see Springsteen at the Rochester War Memorial.

Swanee wrote an inspired review for the CT. My favorite part is the last paragraph: “Bruce Springsteen is now the biggest thing in rock and roll, and last night's performance only strengthens his position. He has believed all along that rock and roll can do almost anything for a person, and it will be interesting to see how much more it can do for him.”

Bruce Springsteen obviously went on to great success, and Swanee and I saw another half-dozen shows together over the years.

Swanee—himself a CT editor in chief—also went on to do great things. And like Bruce, his feet were always on the ground, and his head and his heart stayed focused on what mattered most: family, friendships, excellence in all he did.

Swanee was one-of-a-kind, an improbable mix of grace, humor, intelligence and—most of all—authenticity. He was the most genuinely cool person I've known.

—Gary Stockman '83

Swanee was a great example for us even when we were too young to understand why. Back in the '80s—when we thought the great ones needed to be bold, powerful, and serious—Swanee was the opposite. He enjoyed

the moment. He was quiet and always the last to talk, but his observations usually built consensus. He never came across as ambitious, but everything he did—writing, playing baseball, teaching, appreciating music—he did with the zest of a lion. As I look today at what leadership and success are about, I realize Swanee had it figured out way back then before any of us.

What I will remember most about him was how he looked on a sunny weekday afternoon last August. Despite his failing health, he found a way to be the happiest



CAMPUS TIMES: Swanson was editor in chief for the calendar year of 1982.

guy on earth, watching Harry play at Yankee Stadium in a Little League championship game. He was living in the moment and focused on what mattered most. A lesson for us all.

—Mark Mozeson '83

John was a great listener. And in his soft-spoken way—frequently leavened with dry humor—he transformed noise into harmony.

CT staff meetings were emotionally charged affairs, 50 of us packed into a low-ceilinged, windowless basement shoebox in Wilson Commons. The combination of sleepless young adults working for free, without academic credit—and struggling to balance classwork and a daily publishing schedule—sparked heated debates on matters meaningful and trivial. We lived for what we did in those grungy, fluorescent spaces. It was all deeply personal.

As voices rose, Swanee took it all in, and at the end brought us home with a thoughtful comment. He earned respect not through shouting or clamor but through the quiet intensity that led him to spend hours crafting a music review or, after his beloved Cubs lost in the 1984 playoffs, to walk fully

clothed into a creek—displaying both the depth of his love and his need to cool off.

We more than loved Swanee—we looked up to him. His dedication and work ethic, his judicious powers of observation—his passion for everything he did—combined to demonstrate one word: leadership. Near the end he showed visitors a heartfelt note of gratitude from a young journalist he had helped train. It was testament to his lifelong impact on those around him, something we all could have written.

—Randall Whitestone '83

Swanee was a leader, and yet often seemed oblivious to it. He said we would do things and so we did. The only time I saw Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five was when Swanee led us out to some club in suburban Rochester.

He loved being in New York even though he claimed to be a Chicago guy. In a group of cynics and short tempers fueled by caffeine and lack of sleep, he was the calm center. And although I saw him angry, I never saw him cruel. He had a remarkable way of accepting and observing the chaos around him.

—John McKeegan '83

Swanee was a great teacher and leader, gifts he conveyed through a quiet but generous spirit of sharing. His impact on us was profound—I am hardly the only one in our group who would have to credit three-quarters of a vast music collection to Swanee's discovery and influence.

Throughout our time with him, he taught and led by example, never more so than in the universal quest of how to live a good and happy life. In his last months, he was still teaching. He endured life's final trial with courage and grace, dignity and humility, and, above all, love and faith.

Swanee had many visitors in those days, and, to a one, we were all struck by his unflagging spirit, his unbelievable concern for how his condition was affecting others, his downplaying of the profound physical pain he was feeling.

He was sad to leave, but as a minister's son and someone who lived a faith-based life, curious about the next chapter.

Swanee was a North Star we all sailed by, more than we realized before. I expect we'll feel adrift for a very long time.

—Richard Keil '83