

## **‘Deeply missed’: Southwest Valley residents remember hunger, youth advocate David Schwake’s life of service**

### **PASSAGES**

**By Kelly O’Sullivan**

#### **INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA**

With a resume of work and volunteer service longer than he was tall, David Schwake touched the lives of thousands of Southwest Valley residents during the 40-plus years he lived and worked here.

As news of the Litchfield Park resident’s death on Feb. 3 spread through the community, friends, colleagues and fellow volunteers mourned the loss of a man many considered a hero, remembering his kindness, humor, loyalty and dedication to helping others.

“David’s passing just doesn’t seem real to me today,” city of Litchfield Park Management Assistant Sonny Culbreth said.

The two men forged a lasting friendship after meeting through their jobs. Mr. Culbreth was Litchfield Park’s Community & Recreation Services director and Agua Fria High School’s swim coach when Mr. Schwake joined Litchfield Elementary School District as food services director in 1994.

“Our mutual love of supporting our youth brought us together,” Mr. Culbreth said.

“David’s leaving us leaves a huge hole in my heart and in our community, a hole that may never be filled; at least the way he filled it,” he said. “I often told him that I knew no one who gives more to his fellow man than he did. He sometimes shared with me how tired he was and that he needed to cut back on some of his activities; it just wasn’t in him to slow down.”

Mr. Schwake retired from LESD in 2018, a year after his wife, Cindy, retired from the district’s Transportation Department, but his workload never waned.

There were too many people

to feed through the Barbara Robey Community Pantry, Agua Fria Food & Clothing Bank and other food programs; too many Kiwanis Club of Litchfield projects to complete; too many community organizations to help and events to plan; and too many kids and families to look out for at places like the New Life Center domestic violence shelter, where he served since 1991.

There were definitely too many Santa suits and colorful costumes to don before making the rounds from Litchfield Park to Tonopah and beyond to motivate people to get involved.

“Dave’s passion for serving others literally seemed to pour out of him and splash onto those around him,” said Agua Fria food bank Executive Director Leanne Leonard, who knew Mr. Schwake for many years and worked with him during the six years he served on the organization’s board.

“I cannot tell you how many times a new volunteer has shown up at AFFCB and stated that they were there to serve because they met Dave somewhere and he encouraged or inspired them to come volunteer at the food bank.”

Calling him one of Litchfield Park’s “great citizens,” Mayor Thomas L. Schoaf said Mr. Schwake’s impact on the community was vast.

“He served our children through his leadership of the LESD food services. Through his involvement in Kiwanis, he champi-

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Sonny Culbreth, left, and David Schwake, center, celebrate with friends and family during Litchfield Park’s 2017 Oktoberfest celebration. [Michael Jordan MJ Propix/Special to Independent Newsmedia]

## COMMUNITY

### Schwake

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oned so many things such as Kiwanis Park, recent refurbishment of our recreation center basketball and tennis courts, and our annual Trout Fishing Derby to mention just a few,” the mayor said. “When he saw a need, he volunteered his time and energy to various activities from cooking omelets for an early morning breakfast fundraiser to serving on many local charitable boards. We will miss David tremendously.”

In November, Mr. Schwake did step back a little, leaving the Litchfield Park Recreation and Public Grounds Commission after 17 years.

COVID-19, which took Mr. Schwake’s life, also denied him the in-person standing ovation he’d have received in November had Mayor Schoaf been able to shake his hand and present him a plaque during a packed Litchfield Park City Council meeting instead of making a virtual Zoom presentation.

Mr. Schwake took it in stride, smiling into his webcam as the mayor and council members sang his praises.

“I just appreciate the opportunity you gave me to do community service. I’m not going anywhere. It’s kind of like when I retired from the school, I got busier. I keep thinking I have to go back to work in order to have some time off,” he said. “It’s great to live in such a wonderful community. It reminds me of the community I grew up with ... it’s just great to be in a small-town community even though we live next to one of the biggest cities in the nation.”

That community was Sulphur, Oklahoma, where Mr. Schwake grew up. According to his LinkedIn profile, he worked in his family’s bakery and in food services at his college alma mater, Oklahoma State University.

Armed with a bachelor’s degree in hotel and restaurant administration and a master’s degree in nutrition, food and institutional administration, he moved to Arizona in 1980, managing restaurants and directing the food service program at Perryville Prison before becoming LESD’s director of food services.

“Service was in his blood and it gave his life purpose and meaning. He continued to pick up donations for food banks and the Robey Pantry daily. It was common for him to still come and go from our schools and buildings, collaborating with staff and brightening our spirits with his impressive array of costumes,” Dr. Gunning said. “He continued to text at all hours of the night to ensure no one would go hungry on his watch. One of the last times I saw David was when he dressed up like Santa Claus and brought his elves to visit our district office. He was a fun guy with such a loving heart — remarkably committed to making this world a better place.”

The same held true at the Agua Fria food bank.

“Although his position on our board was a volunteer position, and for more than half of the time he served he had a full-time job, you would have thought that his work at AFFCB was a fulltime job as well. It was not uncommon to have almost daily pop-in visits from Dave at the food bank, as he was dropping off whatever donation he had picked up or received from all over the community,” Ms. Leonard said.

“Dave had a passion for rural areas like Tonopah (where he had a home) and wanted to ensure that those living in these areas had access to healthy nutritious food. Whether it was his stories about growing up in a bakery, his knowledge of local Arizona farms and fresh produce, his social media posts about all the best restaurants to eat at, or his fun trivia facts on fruits and veggies, David Schwake loved food and nutrition,” she said.

“But more than all of those things, he loved people! Dave’s physical presence here on earth will be deeply missed but the imprint that he left on many people’s lives and on his community will not be soon forgotten.”

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It's impossible to quantify the number of meals the registered dietician and nutrition specialist served, the number of people he kept from going hungry or the lives he made better over the course of his lifetime, but his work earned many accolades.

In 2017, the School Nutrition Foundation honored Mr. Schwake as one of the country's five nutrition heroes, presenting the awards during a ceremony in Washington, D.C.

"A special film crew came to my office to film a short statement from me about David. They asked me to describe what made David a food service hero. If my memory serves me correctly, I said David was not only a hero, he was a superhero" Mr. Culbreth recalled. "David was also a real friend to our community through his support of our youth and recreation programs. If it helped our youth, he was in support of it. His message was always clear to me. Everyone deserved to have a nutritious meal and our children are our future. David not only spoke those words; he lived his life making them come true."

LESD Superintendent Dr. Jodi Gunning agreed.



David Schwake donned one of his many costumes when he worked Litchfield Elementary School District's booth at Avondale KidFest in 2016. [LESD photo]



Cindy Schwake, left, poses with her husband and Litchfield Elementary School District Superintendent Jodi Gunning during an August 2018 Governing Board meeting where he was honored for his retirement after 24 years with the district. [LESD photo]