



Gary Rust

May 25, 1935 - January 5, 2025

Gary Wayne Rust, a Missouri state representative who founded a media company that grew to 50 newspapers in eight states, died at his home on Sunday, Jan. 5, 2025, surrounded by his wife, children and many grandchildren. He was 89. Although accomplished in many things - from business to sports to politics - his greatest love and joy was his wife, Wendy.

Rust was a long-time Cape Girardeau leader and benefactor, who cherished friends and colleagues and who enjoyed conversation with anyone who had anything interesting to say. He loved people - and he loved to encourage them. He especially loved and appreciated his children and grandchildren, whose accomplishments he celebrated.

Born in Cape Girardeau on May 25, 1935, to Wayne and Eva Rust, Rust excelled in sports as a young man, especially in baseball and basketball. While playing second base for the American Legion baseball team, he helped bring two state championships and one national regional championship home to Cape Girardeau. As a college freshman and sophomore, his University of Missouri basketball team was ranked among the top in the nation.

He wasn't just a jock growing up in Cape; he was also known for his wide grin and musical talents. Thankfully (according to those who knew him at the time), his professional music career as a clarinet and ukulele player in a local jazz

band named "The Thirsty Four" was short-lived. He also tried acting, but in a high school production of the play "Our Town" he forgot the one line he was supposed to deliver, dashing that aspiration.

He was salutatorian at University High School Prep, which was part of Southeast Missouri State University, and was awarded an athletic scholarship to the University of Missouri, where he lettered in baseball and basketball before transferring to Washington University to be closer to his high school sweetheart, Wendy Kurka, whom he first met at Methodist Youth Fellowship at Centenary Church in Cape. Not long after arriving in St. Louis, on Thanksgiving Day 1955, he married the pretty art student, and together they began a family.

While holding down two part-time jobs, he graduated top in his retail business class with Beta Gamma Sigma, summa cum laude and Omicron Delta Kappa honors, and returned to Cape Girardeau with Wendy to begin working with his family's retail furniture business. Their first two children, a son and daughter, died early: the first 36 hours after birth, the second at little more than a year old, in a car crash that also claimed Wendy's father and younger sister Sally. Through faith and love, the tragedies created an even stronger bond in their marriage. Together, they welcomed Wendy's youngest sister Kim, an elementary student, into their house, along with Wendy's mother Virginia, who had been in a coma for 6 weeks after the accident, and who brought a bright light of Christian strength after she recovered. Virginia became an important part of their household for the next several years as Wendy and Gary would go on to have six more children.

Over the next 10 years, Rust's service accomplishments to the community quickly stacked up, as did the individual recognitions and honors. Among his activities, he was president of the Cape Girardeau Jaycees; vice-president of the Missouri Jaycees; president and board member of the United Fund;

member of the Cape Girardeau Historical Association; vice-president of the Cape Executive Club; three-term board member of the Cape Girardeau Chamber of Commerce; member of the Southeast Missouri Hospital Association; recipient of the Cape Distinguished Service Award as Outstanding Young Man of the Community; State Award as Outstanding Young Man of Missouri; president of his children's PTA; member of the National Home Furnishings Board Governmental Affairs Committee; member of the Cape Chamber Aviation Committee; Centenary Church choir member; trustee of the Missouri Council on Economic Education; member of the Rotary Board of Directors; and member of the Salvation Army Board.

In 1969, the furniture store he co-managed with his father Wayne and brother Harry was recognized as the Outstanding Furniture Store in the country in cities under 50,000 population. About the same time, he also decided to follow his calling into public service and politics.

Concerned about the state of American society, he was already a voracious reader of economic, political and social theory. Inspired by Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan, he sought to transfer his learning to a wider public and began delivering speeches to clubs and civic groups around the state. In the late 1960s, he gave more than 200 speeches to area audiences on the topic "What's Right with America." He also bought interest in a small weekly newspaper as an outlet for commentary.

In 1970, he announced his candidacy for Congress with the following words: "I had not and do not intend to be just an eyewitness to history; one who merely continues to observe from some aloof position the continued decline of our country's morals, goals, freedoms, clean resources, and economic and military strengths. Citizenship is not a spectator sport ... and that is why I am entering the political arena as a candidate for Congress."

Unfortunately - or fortunately, depending on how you interpret history - he was not elected to Congress. Instead, stung by what he believed unfair political reporting, he left the family business and began focusing his energy on his small weekly newspaper. His goals were to create a newspaper that would provide fair and accurate news reporting, and which would serve the retail advertising community with a powerful vehicle to deliver their messages to consumers.

Before he could dedicate himself full-time to the newspaper world, however, he was appointed to an open seat representing Cape Girardeau in the Missouri General Assembly. He would later be overwhelmingly re-elected state representative three more times and come to serve on the important conference committees on reorganization and appropriations.

As a representative in Jefferson City, he was known for his dogged study of the issues and his sense of public service and political fairness. His weekly newspaper columns often touched upon his official duties in Jefferson City. And always, he outlined clearly his belief that government policy should be decided not on the basis of partisanship, but on the merits of the issues.

He frequently expressed his opinion that the American people and the people of Cape Girardeau could be trusted to make the best decisions if they were simply given fair and accurate information.

Balancing public service with a fledgling business and a growing family was not always easy. And oftentimes, the three areas of his life intersected in his writings. A trip with the family to a dance performance on the university campus became both a column on the challenges of taking small children to public events and the relative merits of state funding for the arts. A trip to the SEMO District Fair became a story about one of his children's favorite rides

and a tribute to the hard work of farmers.

His columns were full of local events and names, and they provided a sense of identity for much of the community. They also provided him an opportunity to share important thoughts and inspirational excerpts from the newspapers and newsletters he read tirelessly, usually at 4 in the morning at truck stops, where he knew he could always find good light and a hot pot of coffee.

In 1978, with business competition threatening the small weekly newspaper he had grown into a trio of total market-coverage, multi-weekly newspapers in Southeast Missouri, he decided begrudgingly not to run again for state representative. To his colleagues in the Missouri House, he explained succinctly: "Normally, decisions of this type are made because of personal, physical, business, financial or family reasons ... and this is the case with mine. I have always been an advocate of the competitive, free-enterprise system, and Friday it became apparent that a new competitive development affecting my business would require my full and undivided attention."

In his weekly column to the public, he explained further his decision not to run for re-election. He made several points: "At the risk of shocking some of my Republican friends, I am tired of being expected to believe that the accumulated wisdom of the ages has been secretly entrusted only to Republican candidates and Republican officeholders. Some Democratic candidates are better than some Republican candidates. Some Democratic officials are great and wise. I would like to feel FREE to say so without being accused of treason or ingratitude, particularly in my position as a newspaper columnist. Will I miss being a state representative? I'm sure I will. I've made some great friends who I hate to leave ... It's been a great ego trip, but it's now time to put my efforts, knowledge and influence to work where I feel it will do the most good. And that is in the field of informing the public."

From that time on, Rust dedicated himself to the media industry, bringing a visionary strategy of creating strategic marketing zones throughout rural areas, and along with a group of talented executives, including each of his children at one time or another, grew Rust Communications to 50 newspapers in eight states read by more than a million people. In 2003, he retired from day-to-day operations and transferred management to sons Jon and Rex as co-presidents and continued to serve as chairman of the board, most active in the Southeast Missourian's editorial positions. He continued to come into the office at least weekly until September 2024.

Over the years, Rust's newspapers won hundreds of state and national awards, including the top community service awards from the national United Way, the Missouri State Teachers Association, the Associated Press, the Suburban Newspapers of America and the Inland Press. Three times between 2006 and 2016, while he was chairman of the board, the Southeast Missourian was recognized as one of the top four newspapers - including as top newspaper - in the nation for a community its size.

In 1993, Rust Communications was recognized by the Cape Girardeau Chamber of Commerce with its Industry of the Year Award. In 1999, he was honored with the highest award in the newspaper industry given by the Suburban Newspapers of America. In 2002, he was recognized with the Rush H. Limbaugh Award by the Cape Girardeau Chamber of Commerce, and later in the same year by the Inland Press Association with its highest individual honor, the Ralph D. Casey Award. In 2003, he was inducted into the Missouri Press Hall of Fame. In 2004, he and his wife Wendy were recognized by Southeast Missouri State University as "Friend of the University." In 2009, he received the Silver Medal Award from Tri-State Advertising and Marketing Professionals for his service and support of individuals in media and marketing. In 2011, he received The Missourian Award for his contributions to the state and nation in civics, business and politics. And in 2019, he was the

inaugural recipient of the Drury Family Spirit of Entrepreneurship Award by the Cape Girardeau Chamber of Commerce. In recognizing Rust, president and CEO of Drury Hotels, Chuck Drury aptly described him as "a man of passion, humor, honor and integrity."

Individually, over the years, Rust served the public and his industry in official board capacities. Among them: Southeast Missouri State University Foundation; University of Missouri Publications; Certified Audit of Circulations; Missouri Commission on Civil Rights; Southeast Missouri State University President Search Committee; Chairman of the Benevolent Society of Greater Cape Girardeau; Chairman of the Missouri Associated Press; Member of the Missouri State Government Review Commission; Member of the Cape Girardeau Community College Steering Committee.

Not all Rust's contributions were public, however. He privately and anonymously donated time, energy and money to numerous causes. He was a quiet benefactor to both downtrodden individuals, as well as to his community's leading institutions.

As he explained when he announced his candidacy for Congress, Rust never wanted to be a spectator. Among his favorite writings was Theodore Roosevelt's "The Man in the Arena."

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in

the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

At critical times when companies were considering locating in Cape Girardeau, Rust provided funds and counsel to make it happen. He gave money to entrepreneurs to help them launch businesses, and he stepped in, quietly, to help solve important community problems.

Throughout, Wendy was always by his side, and theirs was a life-long love affair, holding hands, joking with each other and gazing at each other with respect and adoration. Together, they built a house, called Birdsong, which was featured in the movie "Gone Girl". It became the gathering place for family, especially at Thanksgiving when their anniversary was celebrated. Children, grandchildren and great grandchildren came from all around the country - and, at times, the world - for storytelling, deep conversation, games and food, which all helped to prepare. In November, he and Wendy celebrated 69 years of marriage.

Among his favorite activities the past few years: reading a book or two a week along with two to three newspapers a day, including, of course, the Southeast Missourian; meeting with "The Old Goats" coffee klatch and men's bible study groups; attending LaCroix Church in person or online; meeting with the Southeast Missourian editorial board; watching television news; cheering on the Kansas City Chiefs and SEMO football teams; and living and celebrating life with Wendy and his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Rust is preceded in death by his parents, Wayne Bradford and Eva Palmer Rust; infant son and daughter, both named Robin; son Rex Dearmont Rust; brother Harry Rust and sisters-in-law Sally Kurka and Kim Kurka McDowell.

He is survived by his wife, Wendy Kurka Rust, and his children, Penny Rochelle Rust Terry, Gary Wayne Rust II, Holly Rust Payne, Wynn Bradford Rust, Jon Kurka Rust and their families.

Penny and Alan Terry live in Pinehurst, North Carolina; their children are Katherine Marie Terry (Kevin Hasbun) and their children Elias Terry Hasbun, Anna Terry Hasbun and Julia Terry Hasbun; Alex Benjamin (Julie) Terry and their children James Peter Terry and William Joseph Terry. Gary and Suzuyo Rust live in Cape Girardeau; their children are Julia Misaki Rust; and Thomas Sho (Whittney) Rust and their son Kai Rust. Holly and Richmond Payne live in Hoffman Estates, Illinois; their children are Reagan Jane (Jordan) Wicker and their son Jackson Lawrence Wicker; Morgan (Ryan) Lesley and their daughter Hannah Paige Lesley; and Robyn (Jeffrey) Ruser. Wynn and Kimberly Rust live in Cocoa Beach, Florida; their children are Erik Rockford (Jennifer) Rust; Rachel Ann Rust; Rebekah Kristina Rust; and Sarah Elizabeth Rust (Vance Miller). Jon and Victoria Vygodskaia-Rust live in Cape Girardeau; their daughters are Yuliana Kurka Rust, Ekaterina Ava Rust, Elizaveta Sophia Rust and Anna Borisovna Ryzhkova.

Rust is also survived by his brother Jim (Beverly) Rust, daughter-in-law Sherry Johnson Rust, sisters-in-law Joy Kurka Gilbert and Barbara Rose Rust and brother-in-law Terry McDowell.

Arrangements are being handled by Ford and Sons Funeral Home. There will be no visitation or public funeral, which is Gary's and Wendy's wish.

In lieu of gifts or flowers, Gary and Wendy wanted to encourage donations to the Community Journalism and Civic Engagement Fund, which supports journalists and journalism in Southeast Missouri. Donations, which are tax deductible, can be mailed to Community Journalism and Civic Engagement Fund, c/o Cape Area Community Foundation, 980 N. Kingshighway, Suite

103, Cape Girardeau, MO 63701. Or made online at: www.JournalismSupport.com. Memorial messages are welcomed.

Condolences may also be mailed to Rust Family, 301 Broadway St., Cape Girardeau, MO 63701.

Tribute Wall

RW

“ Wendy, I just wanted to say how sorry I am for your loss. Gary's obituary was informative and very interesting. My sister, Kimberly, and I had a chance to speak with you both briefly after the Gone Girl gathering. Of course, I knew Kim best, but will always remember having to perform something for a Halloween treat at your house in the neighborhood. I'm thinking of you. Becky Bender Van Wagner

Rebecca Van Wagner - January 26, 2025 at 07:43 PM

JS

“ In 1972 Gary hired an 18 year old boy to work in the press room at the Bulletin Journal. That changed my life and set me path that allowed me to travel the country. I eventually settled in Wyoming working for a top quality newspaper, I learned that from Gary. Over the years I would stop in from time to time, and Gary always had time. God blessed me with a very fulfilling and wonderful life, and I owe much of that to Gary Rust.

John Sides - January 16, 2025 at 04:36 PM

MA

“ Missouri Press Association is saddened by the loss of Gary Rust, who repeatedly proved to be an innovative and intuitive newspaperman. Gary Rust's newspapers continue to positively impact the communities they serve, and his legacy as a journalist, a businessman and as a Missourian is one of which the whole state can be proud.

Missouri Press Association - January 16, 2025 at 02:37 PM

RH

“ Sorry to hear about Gary's passing. I'm sure he's in a better place. He had a great sense of humor and a youthful spirit. When visiting his son Gary Jr., he would play ping pong with us. I used to see him at Venture setting up shop in the cafe on a regular basis. My condolences to Gary Jr., Penny, Rex, Jon and Wendy.

Robert Hale - January 13, 2025 at 07:12 PM

JS

“ I was so sorry to hear of Gary's passing. My main memories of him revolve around his and Wendy's enthusiastic support of Adult and Teen Challenge of Mid-America when I had the privilege of serving there. The support was through using our students to provide their lawn care, many very positive pieces in the Southeast Missourian, and generous financial donations.

There is one instance that stands out in my mind, however. In 2007, as we were raising funds to build a gymnasium for our students, Gary and Wendy made an extremely generous gift. Because of the generosity of that gift, we wanted to name the building after the Rusts. Gary contacted me and said that he also wanted to have the gym named after Harold Kuehle, who was a dear friend to him and a long time Board Member and Chairman of the Board of Teen Challenge and had passed away. I had always greatly respected Gary but he went up several levels in my mind when he did that. He was more concerned about keeping Harold's significant contribution to Teen Challenge alive than having his own gift recognized. That spoke volumes about who Gary Rust is. He will be missed.

JACK R SMART - January 09, 2025 at 04:34 PM

JS

“ Gary was a massive figure in Missouri journalism, but he was always kind and approachable. As the now retired AP correspondent in St. Louis, I was privileged to have so many conversations with Gary during visits to Cape Girardeau, at AP-sponsored meetings and conferences, at Missouri Press gatherings and at other events. My prayers to his wonderful family.

Jim Salter - January 07, 2025 at 09:34 AM

SL

“ I had the privilege of working for Gary and his family for ten years. While he could occasionally instill a bit of fear, he was always fair and a genuinely good man. On a few occasions, he helped me personally, and I'll always be grateful for that. Gary had a sharp sense of humor, and I still find myself quoting him now and then.

One of my favorite memories is from a time I was cutting something on the light table. He walked in during a tour he was giving, rounded the corner, and quipped, "Does Scott cut that straighter if you watch him, Jonathan?" I can't help but laugh every time I think of it.

I hadn't seen him in a few years, but whenever I did, he always greeted me with a warm smile and a kind word. He was a good man and will be missed.

Scott L. - January 06, 2025 at 06:45 PM