

Al Levitt Tribute

By Dalyn Dye, former president and CEO of Hoogwegt USA

Al was both an industry business colleague and a really good friend. I've known him for years, but I cannot even recall how we first met.

As we got to know each other, we learned that we had a couple of things in common. We were both Iowa Hawkeye grads, and we lived in adjacent villages in the northwest Chicago suburbs. That made it easy for us to connect a couple of times per year for breakfast at our favorite spot, Around the Clock restaurant. Al would periodically send me a message saying, "Hey, isn't it about time for an ATC meeting."

Typically we'd get together when something crazy was happening in the dairy world. But even if the business was a little boring, we would make up a reason to meet. As the CEO of an international dairy trading company, we would discuss U.S. and global dairy markets and how we could create more business for the U.S. dairy industry.

In the early 2000s, I asked Al to help me with some research for the first "public" dairy speech that I gave at the California Creamery Operators Association. At that time the U.S. presence in the international market was small but the opportunity was big. Together we advocated that the U.S. dairy industry needed to change if we were going to capture the great opportunity in global trade. The message was very well received.

Al went on to help me with several speeches in the early 2000s and always did a great job supporting the message of how we can expand the U.S. dairy footprint.

But, even more important than dairy, every time we had breakfast we would also talk about life's weighty matters, including faith, family and friends. Al always wanted to know how my wife and boys were doing and he loved talking about Angie and his kids and grandkids. I will never forget him reaching out for a little moral support telling me about how he would be holding his grandson for his upcoming bris. Al was so nervous.

Last September was the last time Al and I had breakfast together. We of course talked about the dairy business. We talked about family. And we discussed his ongoing health challenges. Weeks later, he sent me an email from the hospital. He had learned of his new diagnosis—leukemia—but he was a fighter and optimistic he would beat it. I had just had shoulder surgery and, in typical Al fashion, he was more concerned about me than himself.

When we spoke on the phone in mid-January, I let him know that while I enjoyed having breakfast to talk dairy, I enjoyed even more just having breakfast with my good friend and I looked forward to him getting well and coming home soon. I am going to miss him very much.