

BERCHAU, William "Willi"



April 11, 1914-May 20, 2015. At 101, years he is safely home in the beauty of everlasting life. Willi passed away a man freed from a long struggle with the court and their appointed guardianship program. Born in Antakalne (Kowno), Lithuania, to Wilhelm and Auguste Berchau, he became a dairy manager. Speaking Lithuanian, Russian, German and English, he had a passion for science, classical music, politics, mathematics and avidly read English and German newspapers. He lived under the brutality of Stalin and, in 1937, Hitler struck a deal to remove those of German ethnic origin from Lithuania; most related to those from the days of Catherine the Great. Forced into the army at the end of 1943 to fight the British, he was severely injured and spent the rest of the war in England, forever grateful for their treatment. After the war he had a choice to return to Stalin's Russia or West Germany, he chose Germany. Then, in 1950, President Eisenhower granted 50,000 Europeans emigration to the United States. Willi had tutored a young man in Germany who came to the US and became Dr. Jonas Byla, neurosurgeon, at John Hopkins and in Chicago. Dr. Byla became his sponsor. Entering the US on Oct. 9, 1951 in Chicago, IL, he worked for Amour Car Lines, while going to night school and became a railroad inspector. Willi and his wife, Ursula moved to Clearwater in 1979. They were married for 52 years and had no children but was devoted to a host of nieces and nephews in Germany. When his wife fell ill, he took on her total care until her passing in 2009. In the midst of grief, he became a victim of a misunderstanding of a Realtor and ended up in an oppressive guardianship and court system. His German relatives, the Christmans, tried to help, but their hands were tied by differences in laws between the two countries. Willi's pastor and his wife contacted the Florida's Ombudsman Program Department of Elder Affairs on Willi's behalf. Once he exercised his remaining rights, the guardian went back to court saying others were interfering and a power struggle ensued. The rest of his rights were removed. After a surgery, without notice to Willi, or his living facility, and without a doctor's order he was picked up and dropped off at an ALF, lock down, Alzheimer's unit. Since one cannot be denied access to a Spiritual Adviser, his pastor found him. He didn't have TV, phone, newspapers, or friends from the community he had become so close to at the Fountains. He had no one he could converse with at the facility. Friends found a reporter who had done articles about this guardian years prior, who was now working for ABC Action News. They brought Willi's plight to the public. Most American's refuse to believe this can happen in this country, until it happens to them. Florida state Senator, Jeff Brandes, also responded. Once he met Willi, he too could see what everyone else knew, Willi was a capable senior citizen in an unfair situation. In December 2013, Willi finally regained his freedom and all of his rights were restored. He returned to his previous home, living independently at the Fountains.

The Willi legacy is one of teaching others how to deal with life's hardships, through struggles, during war time and guardianship woes in a "free" country. The happiest people may not have the best of everything but they make the best of everything they have. He had the courage to fight against elder injustice and a poorly monitored system that often allows unethical abuse of ward's person and mental state, funds and property. There are now two more bills regarding guardian abuse on the governor's desk to be signed. Willi believed that his friends were the "best of the best", but it was he who was the "best of the best", always thinking of others. In his true spirit, he thanks ABC Action News, who won state, national and the prestigious Dupont Award for his story; Senator Brandes, for championing a bill regarding guardianship; his attorney, Brian Bursa, a true defender for the elderly; Drs. Weinstock and Hodan; all his friends at the Fountains that supported him; the efforts of the Ombudsman Program; The National Association To Stop Guardian Abuse; Dr. Sam Sugar MD; and the "Free Willi Team", Jimmy Riley, railroad brother and buddy; Heather Riley, tireless researcher and friend; Jane Barr, "Most Trusted Friend"; all the friends and neighbors who rallied to his cause; his relatives, the Christmann's, who took up many a pen to fight from afar; Petra Herold, Willi Schoen, Marlies Venohr, The Kuelberg families, Helga Peters and Arnim Rogowski, who called to offer encouragement. To his pastor Dr. Peter Stiller and wife, Anne, for their relentless time and efforts to free Willi; and Pastor Preibe, who welcomed Willi into the spiritual family of Bay Pines Lutheran Church. Donations to Suncoast Hospice are always appreciated in honor of his loving and tender care.

Funeral Service is Friday, May 29, 4 pm Bay Pines Lutheran Church, 7589 113th Lane N. Seminole followed by service and reception, Friday, May 29, 6 pm, The Fountains of Boca Ciega Bay 1255 Pasadena Ave. S., South Pasadena.

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