

Life of a Farmer

My father-in-law, Glenn Paulhamus, liked to characterize himself as a “simple farmer.” This always appealed to me, because growing up my mother liked to talk about living on a small dairy farm in upstate New York until she was age 15. She talked about what a hard life it was in those days. They had no central heat, but rather they lived by a woodburning stove. “The girls” milked the few cows they had and “the boys,” my mother’s brothers, did “the hard work.” Mom went to school, in the winter, on a horse drawn sleigh, which one time, she recalled, turned over in the snow, leaving all the kids laughing.

My mother married a city boy. My father was at least a third generation New York City, Upper West Side resident. He adored the idea of marrying a farm girl, and she loved winding up with a big city boy. They moved out to the suburbs. My father always wanted to buy a farm somewhere, and my mother’s dream was to live in a brownstone in Manhattan.

Enter my in-laws from Cogan Station. I always like to refer to them as people from Quiggleville, since to me that sounded more exotic. You actually can imagine a place named “Cogan Station” but “Quiggleville?”

One of my favorite things in life is that when we travel, especially overseas, people always ask where we are from. Every member of my family likes to say “Philadelphia,” since they believe that most people have never heard of Williamsport. I respond, pointing to my wife Kim, she’s from Quiggleville. That usually brings smiles. There are people in the world, however, who know that Williamsport is “the home of Little League World Series,” because they have seen in it on the European version of ESPN.

The first time that I was at “the dairy farm” in Cogan Station, Kim’s brother, Scott, was letting the cows in the barn from their day of nourishment out in the fields. I had never seen or thought about the fact that each cow knew its stall. In fact, one cow would wait for another, to make sure that they all arrived at their correct digs.

For me there was a certain amount of romance to the stories I heard about farming, but I found out quickly that it was also a lot of hard work, early morning hours, and endless responsibilities. Added to that were the economic pressures of milk prices, government regulation, transportation, and the ordinary vagaries of life that combined with farm responsibilities, made it an occupation not for the emotional or physical weakling.

When I told my parents that I was marrying an Upstate Central Pennsylvania farm girl, they were certain that we would have a great life. To some extent, we repeated my parents’ experience. I was elated to meet this delightful, beautiful farm girl and marry into a tightknit large family. She enjoyed the many trips to the big city, particularly the stores

and Broadway. Kim became something of a connoisseur of really strange, offbeat, off-off-Broadway. But that is another story.

It is easy to characterize people based upon where they are from, how they look, or what they do. Not so with Glenn and “Honey” Paulhamus. Throughout their 67 years of marriage Republican and Democratic politics mixed peacefully in their home. Glenn, an avid gun collector, had a deep and thoughtful conversation with me one day after a mass shooting somewhere out west. “I need to have a driver’s license for my car; why shouldn’t people have licenses if they want to own guns.” Coming from a devout NRA member, hunter, and fisherman, I was somewhat surprised at his view of the Second Amendment. Glenn was a thoughtful guy, notwithstanding the comradery, humor, and most often, lighthearted conversation.

Once when I was discussing with Glenn a business problem which I was facing, he gave me probably the best advice I ever received. “Always have a backup plan,” he counseled, “just in case your wishes, dreams, and plans don’t work out as you would like.” I have always followed that advice diligently, and found that it gave me comfort when I was facing a difficult decision.

I witnessed the family go through some of their own difficulties, whether with other family members or health concerns. They always acquitted themselves uprightly, with integrity, and thoughtfulness. Big families mean more people to have good times with, but also to disagree with. In the not too distant past, Glenn and I were sitting alone, just the two of us, when he asked me why I thought that a certain family matter had arisen. I told him that, “DNA does not guarantee that everyone in a family will be the same or think the same.” We proceeded to discuss the differences within families. He knew that I loved history, and I told him about the famous story of the Adams family, where one of the President’s sons became a President himself, and the other one died an alcoholic, a broken man. “DNA may be important at some level, but does not guarantee that everyone is going to be reasonable and thoughtful all the time.” I have no idea if that gave him any comfort, but a thoughtful, meaningful discussion ensued.

In illness and in the passing of his life, Glenn was heroic, brave, and considerate of others. During the last stages of his illness, when I would go up to visit him, he would thank me for coming up and then apologize to me for not being more conversational. To the very end, Glenn Paulhamus showed grace, decency, and respect to others. It would be great if the whole world was like that.

While we will miss this “simple” farmer, there is something to be learned from a life based upon family, working the land, respect for others, and copious quantities of love. A little bit of beer never hurt either. As we say in Hebrew, *Baruch Dayan Ha’ehmet*, Blessed is the Great Judge.

We will miss Glenn, but we will always fondly remember his positive example and contribution to his family, the community, and ultimately the larger landscape of life.

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