

Fred D. Hafer, former GPU, FirstEnergy executive played many roles

Fred Hafer is recognized by many as the corporate face of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident.

By Jason Brudereck *Reading Eagle*

As a vice president for GPU Inc., Fred Hafer became a public face of the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in 1979. His involvement caused his family to worry about a public backlash against him for things that were part of his job.



"Having to testify so much, and appear at public meetings and hearings and stand up and say essentially to the public, 'I represent the company you now hate, and I am also the person who is trying to double your electric bill,' " Hafer said in a 1999 interview.



"I didn't wear a bulletproof vest or anything, but just tried to be smart, be aware, be alert and understand that sometimes people do strange and irrational things," he said.

After the accident at TMI, Metropolitan Edison Co., the GPU subsidiary that owned 50 percent of TMI had to increase its rates dramatically to pay for the accident.

While he may have feared becoming a scorned figure, he did not have to worry. Hafer went on to become a beloved community leader in Berks County.

"Fred was the master of being generous and giving back to the community," said longtime friend Daniel M. Goodyear, 69, of North Heidelberg Township. "I could write a book about his giving and how he helped so many people."

From 1997 until the merger with FirstEnergy, Hafer was chairman, president and chief executive of GPU Inc. He retired in 2002 as chairman of FirstEnergy Corp.

He served on the boards of many local charities, civic groups and institutions. "From the Caron Foundation to local libraries, he set the pace for many of us to follow with his involvement with the community," said Goodyear, a former president and owner of Pennsylvania Steel Foundry & Machine Co., Hamburg.

"He gave so much to the community with United Way, Olivet Boys and Girls Clubs and, well, I even hesitate to mention organizations for fear I would miss one," said Dr. John Gruber, a retired cardiologist who lives in Spring Ridge. "It's difficult to summarize in a few words what Fred meant to his family and to this community."

Hafer had a sense of humor. "You never went away from a conversation with Fred Hafer without a smile on your face," Gruber said.

When people in Berks County realized there was a need for free and anonymous counseling for troubled youth, they went to Hafer for help in organizing the effort. The result was Berks Talkline, a nonprofit group that has since received more than 135,000 calls from teens and

adults seeking someone to listen to them, said Sandra Eshelman, executive director of the talkline since it began operating in 1990.

Organizers had thought the group would receive about 2,000 calls a year — what would have been about 34,000 by now, she added.

“I asked him how to gauge whether we were successful,” Eshelman said. “His answer — and I still remember this conversation — was we’d be a success if one child is alive tomorrow who otherwise might not have been. “I hope that Fred knew in his heart all of the goodness he did in this community.”

Under a deal with the state Public Utility Commission, GPU donated \$5.7 million to the community foundation — its largest gift ever — in 2000 to promote renewable energy projects. The state commission wanted the fund to be a statewide initiative, but Hafer fought to keep the money in Berks, Murphy said.

“He was a guy who really had the interest of this community at heart, even when he was running an international company,” Murphy said.

Hafer was proud to be a Berks native, said his son, Craig Hafer. “While my dad had great success, he never forgot where he came from,” he said. He didn’t put on airs. “He drank beer, usually Michelob.” Craig Hafer said.

Remarkably, Fred Hafer rose to prominence without a college degree. “He was a self-made man; that’s the kind of thing that doesn’t happen much anymore,” said Edward J. Kuhn Jr., who graduated with Hafer in 1959 from West Reading High School.

“He was obviously very successful for a person who started off in the mailroom,” said Walter Creitz, 83, a Wyomissing resident who was president of Met-Ed during the Three Mile Island accident. “Fred was an ambitious self-starter. “He started as a mailroom clerk and always pleased his bosses and continued to advance.”

Fred Hafer passed away September 2007 from complications of cancer and news of his death spread quickly around Berks County. “This is a sad day for the community,” Berks County Community Foundation president Kevin K. Murphy said. “We’re losing a giant.”

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