

W09, Feature writing portfolio

Brian Brehm

The Winchester Star

'You see with your heart': The inspiring life of Amy McFarland

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WINCHESTER — Many articles have been written about Amy McFarland over the years — ones about her winning beauty pageants, translating the National Anthem into American Sign Language at a Washington Redskins football game, meeting President Barack Obama, supporting causes for underprivileged children and displaced pets, influencing lawmakers to do more for people with special challenges and, seemingly, a million other things.

This article may be the last.

Amy, a Mount Williams resident who not only embraced life but devoured it, died on July 20 at the age of 43. Standing with her as she drew her last labored breath at the [University of Virginia Medical Center](#) in Charlottesville was her loving, devoted mother, Mary McFarland, whose birthday was that same day.

"It's the greatest loss I'll ever have," a heartbroken Mary said Oct. 27, which was the 100th day since Amy's passing. "I'm getting a lot of grief counseling because, unless you've been through it, you just don't know. Some days are worse than others."

You may not realize it but there's a good chance you met Amy during her brief but brilliant life, maybe even had a chat or said a prayer with her. That's because for 18 years, from 2005 until March of this year, the smiling 82-pound dynamo served as one of the greeters at the [Walmart Supercenter](#) at 501 Walmart Drive, just west of Winchester Medical Center. Amy sat in her wheelchair like a throne and made everyone who entered the store feel like the most important person in the world.

"She loved it. She's a little social butterfly," Mary said. "People would stand in line to speak with her, almost like she was the president. And she spoiled the kids rotten. She just loved life."

Her joy and kindness were cherished not only by shoppers but also by the people she worked with at [Walmart Store No. 3344](#). Thanks to those coworkers, Amy and nearly two dozen other former employees will always have a home at 3344 because, in a small plot of land on the eastern side of the building, staff installed a memorial garden in 2007 that is dedicated to the memories of fellow store associates who have passed on.

"This is Amy's stone right here," Mary said as she sat on a bench in the mulch-covered garden and looked down at her daughter's marker.

Store officials, citing corporate policy, were not allowed to discuss the garden with The Winchester Star, but Mary said it is unique and she is not aware of any other Walmart in the country that has one.

Each white-and-blue marker in the garden includes a painting of something the person enjoyed — there's a flamingo, a Wonder Woman symbol, an emergency medical services insignia, a lighthouse, a frog and more. Amy's marker features a tiara to represent her love of competing in beauty pageants.

Amy and four of her coworkers became part of the garden on the morning of Sept. 29 in a brief but moving memorial overseen by store staff.

"It was a very, very touching ceremony," Mary said.

'She was an angel'

Amy was born with ataxic cerebral palsy, a debilitating physical condition that hindered her balance and coordination, progressively decreased her muscle tone and subjected her to many surgeries, medical complications and breathing difficulties. Walking eventually became too difficult so she started using on a wheelchair.

Her condition worsened in June 2007 when Amy was just a month shy of turning 28 years old. That's when she went blind due to the degenerative disease retinitis pigmentosa.

Most people would buckle under the weight of all those physical challenges. But Amy wasn't most people. Even after her legs and eyes stopped working, she still went to work at Walmart to bestow warmth and kindness on everyone who came in.

"She had such a lovely spirit despite her challenges," Mary said. "No matter what happened, she took it in stride. ... I'd be so depressed if I went blind but Amy's comment was, 'You don't see with your eyes; you see with your heart.'"

Amy's worsening health never slowed the pursuit of her passions. With her mother's tireless support and assistance, Amy kept traveling across the country to compete in (and win) beauty pageants; collected hundreds of coats, blankets and food items to help the less fortunate; handed out stickers and gifts to children at Walmart on Halloween and Christmas; bought meals for homeless people she encountered at work; made beaded bracelets to thank frontline workers at [Winchester Medical Center](#) and for the [Winchester Area SPCA](#) to sell to raise money; lobbied state and federal lawmakers to provide stronger support for people with special needs; honored the memory of her father Thomas, who died in December 2010 of pancreatic cancer, by signing the National Anthem at a Washington Redskins (now Commanders) NFL game; was profiled in the international [Supermodels Unlimited](#) magazine; and even got to visit President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama at the White House.

When Amy was at the White House in 2014, Mary said she asked to see Bo, the Obama family's dog. The first lady snuck her into the Diplomatic Reception Room where Amy and Bo played together on the floor.

"Amy did more in her short life than most people will ever do," Mary said. "She was an angel. I was so proud of her."

Amy remained active and relatively healthy until the COVID-19 pandemic. While she was on leave from Walmart — her doctors wanted to keep her as protected from the coronavirus as possible — she started having trouble breathing, Mary said. It wasn't because of COVID, though; it was due to the progression of her cerebral palsy.

By March of this year, Amy was too weak to continue working at Walmart. After developing pneumonia, she was admitted to U.Va. Medical Center on June 22.

Antibiotics didn't work, primarily because the pneumonia was difficult to treat because of Amy's cerebral palsy. To help her breathe, surgeons gave her a tracheotomy on June 26.

"That's when she lost her little voice," Mary said. "That was so hard because my baby loved to talk."

By July 20, Amy was no longer responsive and her organs had begun to shut down due to lack of oxygen. Mary said her daughter had developed acute respiratory distress syndrome, was on dialysis and was being kept alive by machines. That day, with the support of an uncommonly spiritual and supportive doctor, Mary said she opted to shut off the devices and say goodbye to the little girl who had been the light of her life.

"It was traumatic," Mary said, "but U.Va. did everything humanly possible to try to save my baby. ... She was tired of fighting."

Staff at U.Va. Medical Center had given red cloth hearts to Mary and Amy as the end was drawing near. Mary wears hers every day on her shirt or blouse, and Amy held hers in her hand as they lowered her casket into the ground.

'My daughter's legacy'

Mary said she goes to Mount Olive Cemetery in Frederick County every day to read a devotional message to her daughter. It's something she and Amy used to do together on a daily basis.

Thanks to the memorial garden at the Walmart at 501 Walmart Drive, Mary now has a second place where she can feel connected to the precious daughter who filled her life with so much joy.

She also has a fur-covered reminder of Amy at home.

"I'm taking care of her beloved little service dog, Bailey," Mary said. "Bailey was the light of Amy's life and we spoil her rotten."

Mary said she plans on keeping Amy's spirit alive by supporting the causes her daughter held dear. For example, Amy would buy gift certificates to [McDonald's](#) fast-food restaurants and hand them out to kids every Halloween.

“So the other day, I went to three McDonald’s and I got a whole slew of them,” Mary said.

Mary said she has also purchased several coats that she’ll be donating to [Q102 Radio](#) in Winchester during its annual holiday collection campaign, is supporting various fundraisers in her daughter’s memory and plans on visiting the General Assembly in Richmond this winter to promote the importance of keeping the elderly and people with chronic conditions in their own homes rather than nursing facilities or institutions.

Additionally, Mary has been making contributions to the Winchester Area SPCA and hopes that agency will soon help her fulfill one of Amy’s final wishes.

“Amy always wanted an Amy’s Home for homeless animals,” Mary said, “and I promised my baby I was going to make that happen. ... But I’m probably going to wait for spring when I’m a little stronger emotionally. I’m working on me so that I can continue my daughter’s legacy.”

If you would like to make a donation to the local SPCA in Amy’s memory, Mary encourages you to do so by visiting winchesterspca.org.

A matter of life and death: Afghan refugee in Winchester desperate to get his family out of Afghanistan

Sept. 1

WINCHESTER — When the United States withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, residents of that country who had aided American and NATO forces had to flee their homeland to protect themselves from the vengeful Taliban.

Some of those refugees settled in Winchester, working whatever jobs they could find to send money back home to their families and sharing apartments to reduce their living expenses.

This article is about one of the refugees who now calls Winchester home. We won’t tell you his full name or show his face in photographs because his wife and seven children, including a baby he has never held, are still in Kabul, Afghanistan, where they live in constant fear of the Taliban’s bloody reprisals. It’s not an unrealistic concern because the same sect of violent religious extremists killed his brother.

We’ll refer to the local refugee as “Mangal,” which is a common Afghan tribal name shared by hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Afghans.

Mangal is a 36-year-old, college-educated logistics specialist who, from 2011 to 2021, worked with the U.S., NATO and humanitarian agencies in their efforts to free Afghanistan from the Taliban’s oppression and promote independence and opportunities for women in the country.

But when the Taliban regained control of Afghanistan in August 2021, Mangal had to leave his family behind and escape from his homeland.

Mangal's greatest goal is to be granted asylum in the United States, which would allow him to bring his loved ones here to live with him, but his efforts have been bogged down by bureaucracy for nearly two years. The longer his asylum application stays in a holding pattern, the more chance the Taliban will find his family.

Mangal and a friend who is helping him navigate life in the United States, Kerry Kenney of Winchester, recently sat down with The Winchester Star to tell the story of how his quest to build a better Afghanistan led to him and his family fearing for their lives.

The fall and rise of the Taliban

One month after the terrorist group al-Qaida waged a series of deadly attacks in the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan because that country's government, the Taliban-ruled Islamic Emirate, was harboring and supporting people involved in the attacks.

What followed was the longest active war in U.S. history. America's occupation of Afghanistan lasted nearly 20 years — six months longer than the Vietnam War — during which time the U.S. set up a more democratic system of government, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

To ensure the country's continued stability, U.S. and NATO forces remained in Afghanistan. The number of allied troops ebbed and flowed for nearly two decades, reaching as high as 140,000 in 2011.

Three-and-a-half years after al-Qaida's leader, Osama bin Laden, was tracked down and killed by the U.S. in May 2011, NATO announced its plans to exit Afghanistan even though the Taliban was still engaging in combat with allied forces throughout the country.

In February 2020, the U.S. struck a deal with the Taliban that called for the removal of all remaining American troops from Afghanistan in exchange for the Taliban's promise to stop its affiliated militant groups from attacking the United States and its allies.

Beginning on May 1, 2021, before America had fully withdrawn its troops, the Taliban launched a major offensive to retake Afghanistan. By Aug. 15, 2021, Taliban forces were once again in control throughout most of the country, including the capital city of Kabul.

With the Taliban back in power, American forces immediately began evacuating Afghans that had helped the NATO coalition during the war. Along with interpreters and assistants like Mangal, the U.S. also sought to help women and minorities escape.

On Aug. 30, 2021, the last vestiges of the American military flew out of Afghanistan. Unfortunately, they left behind many people who would be vulnerable to the Taliban's brutality, including Mangal's wife and children.

'My family is not safe'

Mangal, a native of Kabul, graduated from college with a degree in management science when he was 25 and, starting in 2011, became involved in efforts to help his country move beyond the oppressive reign of the Taliban.

“My first job was a [World Bank](#) project for a girl’s scholarship program,” he said. “The project was to increase the amount of female teachers in Afghanistan, so World Bank gave them some funds to help convince them to study in a specialized [university] program that would make them able to teach in school.”

The reason young women needed convincing was because memories were still fresh of a 20-year civil war that ended in the mid-1990s with the Taliban seizing control of Afghanistan. The violent fundamentalist group’s laws prevented most females from getting jobs, traveling or going to school past sixth grade. Women could only appear in public with a man and with their bodies completely covered, and they were denied many basic human rights that people in other parts of the world take for granted.

Mangal is a Muslim, as are members of the Taliban, but he does not share the group’s fundamentalist, oppressive attitudes toward women.

“In Islam, our prophet’s wife was a businesswoman,” Mangal said, referring to the prophet Muhammad and his first wife, Khadija bint Khuwaylid. “In Islam, a woman is allowed to do business.”

Mangal continued his work with World Bank for five years, then accepted a job with the multinational, American-led military agency [Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan](#). The mission of CSTC-A was to reform and support the country’s defense forces and emergency services.

Mangal’s job with CSTC-A was to help oversee logistics by managing a database that coordinated incoming and outgoing shipments.

“I worked there almost five-and-a-half years, then that project was finished,” Mangal said.

Afterward, Mangal used his logistics expertise to assist the office of Afghanistan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs in a World Bank-funded project to help women in the country’s rural areas become financially self-sufficient.

Mangal said he worked with the World Bank project for six months, “then the government collapsed.”

With the Taliban back in control, Mangal became a target due to the decade he spent working with female empowerment projects and the CTSC-A. Concerns for his safety intensified a short time later when the Taliban murdered his brother.

“My brother was a bodyguard of one of the members of Parliament,” Mangal said, referring to Afghanistan’s governing body that held power after the Taliban was driven from the country. “He was coming home and was kidnapped on the way. The next day, we found his dead body.

“When they kidnapped my brother, I was told they [the Taliban] had information about me,” Mangal said.

To protect himself, Mangal moved out of his house in Kabul and went into hiding. At that time, though, he had little fear for his family’s safety because the Taliban was only pursuing people who had worked directly against them during the war.

“They were coming after people who had worked with the Afghan military or the U.S., or projects like World Bank and [USAID](#) (U.S. Agency for International Development),” Mangal said.

Rather than meeting the same fate as his brother, Mangal chose to be evacuated from Afghanistan by U.S. and NATO forces. He assumed his wife and children — as well as his brother’s wife and children, whom he had taken on the responsibility of supporting — would soon follow.

Mangal was flown out of the country on Aug. 27, 2021, but his family was never evacuated. He hasn’t seen them in person for two years.

“When I got out of there, my wife was pregnant. Eight months later, I got a baby,” Mangal said. “Now he’s almost walking but I haven’t seen it. ... Every night, I think about them.”

Mangal said his family members live in constant fear of thieves raiding their homes and stealing their belongings, and of the Taliban exacting revenge. His daughter can no longer go to school because she completed sixth grade and her continued education is not allowed, his children cannot play outside because they could be kidnapped and killed, and his wife and sister-in-law cannot work because it is forbidden by the Taliban.

“From every aspect, my family is not safe,” Mangal said.

‘Starting over while under stress’

When Mangal first arrived in the United States in September 2021, he was taken to New Mexico for processing. After 48 days, he was transferred to Harrisonburg, Virginia, to receive relocation assistance, and in December 2021, he and five other Afghan refugees made their way to Winchester to start their new lives.

“We were the first six Afghan refugees who were brought by [Church World Service](#) to Winchester,” Mangal said. “When we came here, everything was totally different [than it was in Afghanistan].”

Some of the differences, he explained, were toilets (many rural Afghans simply relieve themselves in the sand), 24/7 electricity (most of Afghanistan had regular blackouts due to

unstable power-generating systems), keeping dogs as pets (people in Afghanistan sit on the floor to eat, so dogs are not welcome inside their homes because they would, in effect, walk across the dining room tables) and calendars (Afghanistan's Solar Hijiri calendar does not sync with America's Gregorian calendar, which makes it difficult for newly arrived Afghanis to tell someone their date of birth).

Another difference was that in New Mexico and Harrisonburg, the refugees were provided with everything they needed, including food, clothing and shelter. In Winchester, though, they began living independently and had to figure out how to do things like pay rent and use currency different from the Afghan afghani (AFN).

"Imagine walking in the shoes of someone who is literally starting over while under stress," Kenney said.

One of the places that helped Mangal and the five other refugees acclimate to life in the United States was the nonprofit [Literacy Volunteers Winchester Area](#), where Kenney volunteers as an English tutor. Mangal and the other refugees made visits to the organization's office on Cameron Street so they could improve their communication skills.

"The other guys couldn't speak English," Mangal said.

When Kenney met Mangal, she realized his English was already strong so she instead asked if he would help teach his friends and the nearly two dozen other Afghan refugees who have since relocated to Winchester.

"Everybody's getting better," Kenney said of the Afghanis' language skills.

'It was tough for me'

Shortly after coming to the Northern Shenandoah Valley, Mangal obtained a Virginia driver's license and, with help from the other refugees, bought an inexpensive car so he could drive the group to work and elsewhere.

"When I would go to Walmart, I would take the others who needed groceries," he said.

Mangal did all this while working 12-hour shifts at [Rubbermaid Commercial Products](#) in Winchester.

"I had never done physical work before," he said. "Back in my country, I only worked in offices with computers."

After nine months, the physically taxing, fast-paced factory job proved to be too much.

"I was getting dizzy and losing vision," Mangal said. "It was tough for me."

Mangal then landed a job with [Home Depot](#), "but it was hairier than the one at Rubbermaid. I was only able to work for a month there."

He found a more suitable gig at the [Macy's](#) distribution center near Martinsburg, West Virginia, but it was seasonal.

"When the season finished, we all lost our jobs," Mangal said. "I was jobless for some time, then I got a job in Front Royal."

He is now a machine operator at [Hearthside Food Solutions LLC](#) in Warren County, which bakes cookies and crackers. Mangal said he enjoys the job he has held for about eight months but hopes to one day return to the field of logistics.

"I have to do a lot of overtime because I'm supporting a 13-member family," he said.

'I love the people here'

The six original refugees from Afghanistan are now settled in Winchester, leading productive lives and planning for the future.

"I love the people here. Everyone is very respectful," Mangal said. "We are glad to be in a country where people are supporting others."

Kenney has expanded her tutoring with the refugees to include real-world lessons on things like how to apply for credit cards and avoid scams.

At least two of the six have been granted asylum, but Mangal is not among them even though he was the first in the group to apply for this country's protection.

It isn't just an inconvenience; it's a matter of life and death. Mangal can't bring his wife and children, or his brother's wife and children, to the United States until one year after he is granted asylum, but his application for protection has not been processed and no one seems to know why.

"We are checking online and it says, 'Application pending,'" Mangal said. "I've been waiting almost one-and-a-half years."

Kenney said she plans on reaching out to U.S. Reps. Jennifer Wexton (D-10th District) and Ben Cline (R-6th District) to see if they can get the process moving again. Her hope is to have Mangal's asylum approved retroactively to the date of application so he will not have to wait a full year to rescue his family.

"We need a politician to intervene and pick up a phone," Kenney said.

Mangal's dream is to be reunited with his family and likely make Winchester their permanent home.

"I know about the city and the culture, and I'm used to everything," he said. "I think it's better to stay here."

If you have insight that could help Mangal get his asylum application processed, email Literacy Volunteers Winchester Area Executive Director Andy Gail at agail@lvwa.org.

Mayfair Farm: The end of one dream, the start of another

March 31

BUNKER HILL, W.Va. — These are somber days at Mayfair Farm.

Eugene W. "Gene" Nowak, who founded the professional agricultural operation 40 years ago, died on March 5 at age 71 after battling [Lewy body dementia](#) for more than five years.

That leaves his widow, Freight Station Farmers Market co-founder Beth Nowak, in charge of the farm that has sold fruits, vegetables, fish, baked goods and more in and around Winchester for four decades. At 70 years old, though, the countless hours of physical labor it would take to keep the farm running 24 hours a day, seven days a week, is too great of a burden.

Beth's premier farmhand, Miguel Angel Valdivia-Vera, has been given the opportunity to take over operations at the 50-acre Mayfair Farm, but he faces more challenges than most others would in his position. For nearly seven years, the native of Mexico has been battling the United States government over his ability to become an American citizen — a situation that at one point saw him deported and cut off from his wife and three children for two years.

There's no way of predicting the future of Mayfair Farm, but as evangelist and author Robert Schuller famously said, "Tough times don't last, tough people do." And there are no two tougher people in the world than Beth and Miguel.

Gene's story

Gene Nowak was born on the Fourth of July, 1951, in White Plains, New York. His childhood dream was to become a farmer, and he chased that dream by earning a bachelor of science degree in horticulture from [Delaware Valley College](#) (now University) in Pennsylvania.

In 1972, one year before his college graduation, Gene met a pretty young woman who was born in Oregon, raised in Alaska and had recently come to nearby Briarcliff Manor, New York, to pursue a teaching degree. Her name was Beth.

After Beth graduated from college in May 1974, she moved back to her parents' isolated home in rural Alaska, where there was no telephone or electricity.

"We wrote letters back and forth," she said.

In September 1974, Beth agreed to house sit for her grandmother in Rosewood, Oregon, which gave her the opportunity to find work as a substitute teacher and use a phone to call her boyfriend back in New York.

"At Christmastime, he took the [Greyhound](#) [bus] all the way across the United States," Beth said. "When he got there, I said, 'Oh, by the way, we're going to Alaska for Christmas.'"

During his visit to Petersburg, Alaska, Gene asked Beth, "What would you say if I asked you to marry me?" She replied, "Are you asking me to marry you?" The couple became engaged but, due to the convoluted way he popped the question, Gene spent the rest of his life telling people that Beth had proposed to him.

The couple wed in November 1975 and lived in Tarrytown, New York, for three months until an opportunity to manage Jefferson Orchards in Kearneysville, West Virginia, brought Gene and his bride south. The job was fine, Beth said, but Gene's bosses were opposed to him making extra money by selling produce from his own 2-acre garden.

In 1982, Gene learned about a 30-acre farm for sale in Bunker Hill, West Virginia, just a stone's throw north of Frederick County. He and Beth bought the land and, despite the opposition of his employer, planted some potatoes to sell. Jefferson Orchards (which is no longer in business) viewed this as competition and promptly fired Gene while Beth was pregnant with their third son.

"They said, and I quote, 'Since you're determined to become an independent businessman, this is not in keeping with our goals,'" Beth said.

Gene could grow anything, Beth said, and Mayfair Farm was the fulfillment of his dream. He and his sons gathered stones from the property and built a large retaining wall that still stands as a tribute to their hard work, and Beth sold her husband's fruits and vegetables — along with her own baked goods — at local farm markets.

In 2007, with business booming, the Nowaks hired Miguel to help out on the farm. Within a few years, Miguel had gotten married, started a family and was living in a house on the property.

With the exception of the financial and environmental ups and downs that go along with running any professional farm, things were good for Gene and Beth. But in 2017, a relative who had taken a road trip with Gene told Beth, "There's something wrong."

Gene was having difficulty remembering things and performing tasks that he had done for years. By 2019, it was obvious something serious was occurring but he believed the confusion and forgetfulness were just signs that he needed to retire.

In January 2020, Gene was diagnosed with Lewy body dementia, the same condition that caused comedian Robin Williams to suffer from depression, paranoia, memory loss and insomnia before he took his own life in 2014.

According to the [Mayo Clinic](#)'s website, Lewy body dementia "is the second most common type of progressive dementia after Alzheimer's disease. Protein deposits, called Lewy bodies, develop in nerve cells in the brain regions involved in thinking, memory and movement. ... People with Lewy body dementia might have visual hallucinations and changes in alertness and

attention. Other effects include Parkinson's disease signs and symptoms such as rigid muscles, slow movement, walking difficulty and tremors."

There is no cure for Lewy body dementia, and the progressive condition inevitably leads to death within as little as five to seven years.

At the time of his diagnosis, Gene was still managing most things just fine on his own or with a little help from his wife, Miguel and family friends. Because of that, Beth assumed it would be OK if she and their son Daniel visited Alaska for a few days in July 2020 to attend Beth's 50th high school reunion.

Five months before the trip, though, Beth woke up and found Gene crying.

"He said, 'You can't go. I can't get along. I don't know what I'll do if you're not here,'" Beth said. "So I canceled the trip."

In September 2020, one of Miguel's cousins was helping pick tomatoes at Mayfair Farm when Gene told him there were some men on a nearby hillside. The cousin walked over to investigate but no one was there.

"That was the first that I realized he was having hallucinations," Beth said.

As time passed, the hallucinations got worse. By early 2021, reality had taken a back seat to his visions.

"It was impossible for him to function because he would spend all day long chasing these nonexistent people that were taking his property, putting up surveyor stakes, erecting huge movie screens on the hillside and stringing electronic cables across the farm," Beth said. "Then they [the hallucinations] became directed at me because he thought I was doing all this to him, that I, and I quote, was 'screwing him over.'"

In October of last year, Gene told Beth he was going to help her pick a bushel of beans.

"I gave him a bucket and showed him where to pick," Beth said. "He started pulling plants out of the ground and throwing them down."

Soon after, Gene started spending most of his time inside the house, looking for the strange people he insisted were hiding there. He would occasionally get angry and frustrated, even knocking over the TV a few times.

On the evening of Feb. 19, after visiting Winchester with family earlier in the day, Gene told Beth he was going outside. When he didn't return within 15 minutes, Beth went out and looked for him but had no success. She called Miguel for help and the two of them found Gene a short time later.

"He had fallen, I don't know how many times," Beth said. "His back was dirty, his pants were dirty, but he was still walking."

Just three days after he had wandered outside, Gene became unresponsive to the people around him. He was transported to [Berkeley Medical Center](#) in Martinsburg, West Virginia, where doctors determined he had entered the final stage of Lewy body dementia and admitted him to the facility.

Beth wanted to take Gene home, so her friends rallied and got her a hospital bed and wheelchair. Miguel prepared a space in Beth's house and Gene returned to the farm via ambulance on the night of Feb. 24.

Miguel and family friends, along with caregivers from [Home Instead](#) and [Hospice of the Panhandle](#), gave Beth all the help they could caring for Gene in what would prove to be his final week.

On Sunday morning, March 5, Beth said Gene did not have a detectable pulse but was still clinging to life. Doses of morphine would ease his labored breathing for short periods of time, but the drug's effects faded within minutes of each dose.

At 9:35 p.m., a caregiver said it was time. Twenty minutes later, the 71-year-old New Yorker who came to West Virginia to fulfill his dream of becoming a farmer was gone.

"He was ready to go," Beth said before she started crying, something she rarely does. "I don't want to remember that."

Even as Beth grieved the deepest, most profound loss of her life, she never stopped helping others. Following Gene's death, she donated his brain to the University of Maryland School of Medicine so researchers there can hopefully learn more about Lewy body dementia and how to help those with the condition.

Beth's story

Gene's funeral was held on March 19 at [Connections Community Church](#), a place of worship in Inwood, West Virginia, that is located inside a former fruit processing facility where Gene used to deliver apples from Mayfair Farm.

Following the funeral, when friends and family had gone home and the house was quiet, Beth finally realized the love of her life was gone and it was up to her to keep Gene's dream alive.

"I never wanted to be in charge of the farm," she admitted, explaining she was happier selling produce and baked goods, determining which crops would give the best return on investment and educating people about the importance of farming and fresh food. "But the farm is completely paid off. ... We're not walking away from it. There's too much sweat, there's too much blood, there's too many tears."

Mayfair Farm started out as Gene's dream but it became Beth's as well. The woman who holds a master's degree in secondary education even gave up a successful teaching career so she could work the farm full-time with her husband.

"We'd be out there at 11 o'clock some nights putting crop covers on green beans or strawberries so they wouldn't freeze, but it was a shared job," Beth said. "It gave us a chance to work together, to accomplish something together and change people's lives. Not everybody gets that chance."

In 1987, Beth and three friends — Humphrey and Pat Sassoon of Jefferson Farm in Clear Brook and Bob Aberegg of Stoney Lane Farm in Ganotown, West Virginia — decided to start their own outdoor market, Freight Station Farmers Market, at 315 W. Boscawen St. in Winchester. Beth said the venture gave her the opportunity to once again become a teacher, only this time she was instructing adults on the importance of farming and how to grow and prepare the items she sold.

Freight Station Farmers Market was consistently successful for 35 years, but Gene's declining health forced Beth to shut it down on April 23 so she could spend more time at home.

Within a few months, Beth realized she had enough help from Miguel and family friends to allow her to leave the house once in awhile. She teamed up with Cline's Farm Market in Frederick County to sell her products.

Now that Gene is gone, Beth said she'll continue selling Mayfair Farm products at Cline's Farm Market, and she plans on doing some writing. For the next year, though, her biggest responsibility will be preparing Miguel to fill Gene's shoes.

"My boys are fine but at this point, none of them want to come back to the farm on a full-time basis," Beth said. "Miguel does and he's going to have his chance."

Miguel's story

To call Miguel a farmhand is a gross understatement. It's more accurate to say he's a member of the Nowaks' family.

For example, when Gene was in his final months, Miguel didn't hesitate to help on those nights when Beth would call at 3 a.m. because her husband had fallen out of bed. And in October, it was Miguel who took Gene inside the house and stayed with him until help arrived after his confused employer started destroying fruit crops and walking into fences.

Miguel was living in Veracruz, Mexico, 20 years ago when he and his father illegally walked into the United States to pursue the American dream. That dream became a nightmare for Miguel a few months later when his dad decided to return home, leaving the teenager alone in a foreign land where he barely spoke the language.

Needing an income to support himself, Miguel obtained a forged green card so he could get a job. In 2007, he showed that card to Beth and Gene, who assumed it was legitimate and hired him. When they learned three years later that Miguel was in the United States illegally, the Nowaks vowed to help him become a U.S. citizen because he was the best worker they ever had.

On Dec. 22, 2016, Miguel's quest for citizenship was set back when he was charged with driving under the influence in Berkeley County, West Virginia. His wife, West Virginia native Britney Valdivia-Vera, said one of their children needed medicine that night and her husband felt compelled to get it, even though he had been drinking.

Someone in the court system — friends and family aren't sure who — notified [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#) about Miguel's status as an illegal immigrant. On the advice of an attorney, Miguel surrendered himself to federal authorities and, five months later, was granted a provisional waiver that allowed him to stay in the United States on the condition he return to Mexico by Jan. 10, 2019, to apply for a visa that would allow him to legally return to the U.S.

He reported as promised but, after waiting in Mexico for four months, Miguel's visa application was denied. Even though he had a steady job with good pay, a permanent place to live, an American spouse and a sponsor with an annual income that exceeded \$80,000, the [U.S. State Department](#) deemed him a "public charge" who would most likely file for welfare and become a financial drain on the United States, an opinion based in part on his 2016 drunk driving arrest.

That left Miguel stranded in Mexico, living with his parents and picking limes for as little as \$40 a week. Mayfair Farm suffered as well because the Nowaks had to scale back operations due to Miguel's absence and Gene's failing health.

But Gene and Beth never gave up on Miguel. They made countless phone calls, mailed dozens of letters and spent thousands of dollars on attorney and filing fees in an attempt to bring him home.

In March 2021, a court ruled Miguel could not be denied entry into the U.S. because of an assumption he would go on welfare. He filed a new visa application and, four months later, was allowed to return to Mayfair Farm and his family.

Now, the future of the farm is in his hands.

Beth said Miguel, who was taking advantage of a rare day off and was not available to be interviewed for this story, has one year to prove he is capable of growing profitable crops, dealing with vendors and suppliers, maintaining and purchasing equipment, and everything else that goes along with running a professional agricultural operation. He'll also have to demonstrate that he can evolve from being a person who follows directions to a person who gives directions.

"That's going to take him a while to accept," Beth said. "He's getting there slowly."

Beyond his farm duties, Beth said she expects Miguel to take classes and pass the U.S. citizenship test, and become more fluent in English so he can have better interactions with vendors and customers.

Beth is fully committed to helping Miguel, even though the easiest course of action would be to sell the farm and find a nice, quiet place to retire. But she has no interest in walking away from Gene's dream and dashing Miguel's hopes of becoming a successful American businessman.

"If you have a chance to build something yourself and change people's lives in the process, that's a win-win, man," Beth said.