

**W10**

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**The Winchester Star**

**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.