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NEW HAMPSHIRE CITIZEN OF THE YEAR

'A shining example'

The Common Man's Alex Ray recognized for his humanitarian efforts in Ukraine — and closer to home

By Michael Cousineau
Union Leader Staff

HALF CENTURY AGO, restaurateur Alex Ray wanted to help an Ashland farmer named Mr. Schofield who couldn't work after he broke his back when his tractor rolled over.

"I said let's have a Schofield night and have a spaghetti dinner and have all his friends come and I'll give him all the money," Ray said in an interview this month.

Ray hasn't stopped giving and fundraising since that dinner in the mid-1970s.

But his biggest fundraising effort — international in scope — came in 2022 when he announced his company would match \$1 million in donations to help people in war-torn Ukraine. The fundraising campaign has raised more than \$4 million, including \$5 each from three Manchester nuns.

"I do it because it makes me feel worthy," Ray said recently while sitting on the hearth of a stone fireplace inside his Common Man Inn & Spa in Plymouth.

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Alex Ray, owner and founder of The Common Man Family of Restaurants, proudly displays his Support Ukraine pin at the Common Man Inn & Spa in Plymouth.

"I think he is the gold standard of business owners in terms of giving back."

JOHN LYNCH
a longtime friend

WAKEFIELD

Christmas carbon monoxide victims ID'd as Mass. family

■ Fire marshal says the vacation home's propane heating system was the likely cause.

By Paul Feely
Union Leader Staff

Four adults found dead of apparent carbon monoxide poisoning in a Wakefield home on Christmas Day were all members of a Massachusetts family.

Matthew Goldstein, 52, Lyla Goldstein, 54, Valerie Goldstein, 22, and Violet Goldstein, 19, all of Newton, Mass., were found inside a home at 2962 Province Lake Road (Route 153) in East Wakefield after Wakefield police responded to a request for a welfare check.

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner determined Matthew Goldstein's cause of death was carbon monoxide poisoning, and the manner is pending. The cause and manner of death of the three women remain pending the results of additional blood testing, officials said.

"All accounts are that this is an accidental and a very tragic story during the holiday season," state Fire Marshal Sean Toomey said in a video briefing Friday.

No carbon monoxide alarms were found in the home, Toomey said. Carbon monoxide is a colorless, odorless gas that can cause serious illness and death at high levels.

Matthew and Lyla Goldstein have owned the Wakefield property since 2018, online tax records show.

Linus Guillory, superintendent of schools in Brookline, Mass., confirmed Matthew Goldstein was an eighth-grade teacher at Brookline's Baker School.

"We are deeply heartbroken to learn of the passing of Mr. Matt Goldstein, an exceptional educator and a beloved member of our (school) community," Guillory said

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POLITICS

The question: Will Ayotte lean center or right?

■ Evidence suggests down-ballot Republicans won thanks to Ayotte's influence, not Trump's.

By Kevin Landrigan
Union Leader Staff

After the costliest race for governor in state history, Republican Kelly Ayotte follows a popular ally into the corner office and could try to establish New Hampshire as the beachhead for economic and educational freedom.

Departing Gov. Chris Sununu, 50, will be a tough act to follow, wrapping up a record-tying fourth term with his self-effacing

2024
A LOOK BACK

"603 is king" style that propelled him to the top of the popularity charts for U.S. governors.

Thanks to her relatively easy victory over former Manchester Mayor Joyce Craig, there are clear signs that Ayotte, the 56-year-old former U.S. senator and state attorney general, comes into this job with more momentum than Sununu did in 2016.

"Nobody saw this being a nine-point race. It was (seen as) the closest governor's race in the country. Democrats had heavily invested and felt Ayotte had some weaknesses they could exploit," said Dante Scala, professor of politics at the University of New Hampshire.

"In New Hampshire political terms, this turned into a blow-out."

With expanded majorities in both chambers of the New Hampshire Legislature, fiscal conservatives are hoping Ayotte decides to go big rather than try to disarm her past opponents.

Drew Cline is president of the Josiah Bartlett Center for Public Policy, a New Hampshire free-market think tank.

On more than 20 occasions in North American surveys, New Hampshire has annually come out on top as the most

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MARK BOLTON/UNION LEADER FILE

Gov.-elect Kelly Ayotte's transition team has created a website and online portal for anyone interested in serving in state government. In this file photo, Ayotte stands with her husband, Joe Daley, at her election night party at The Artisan Hotel at Tuscan Village in Salem following her win Nov. 5.

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Last week's markets

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Carbon Monoxide

in a statement. “Mr. Goldstein’s dedication to inspiring students and shaping young minds has left an indelible mark on all who had the privilege of knowing him.”

Toomey said investigators have identified the home’s propane gas heating system as the source of the carbon monoxide leak.

“We believe it to be an accidental case,” Toomey said. “We believe there was some sort of malfunction of the propane gas heating system which allowed carbon monoxide gas to not exit through the normal venting system like it should and exit to the outside. We’re still looking into all of the details of that failure at this point.”

Toomey said three of the victims were found in bedrooms in the home, while the fourth was found in a bathroom. He would not say which victims were found

where, and said investigators are still working to confirm they died overnight, the current working theory, based on the locations of the bodies.

The Goldsteins had been expected to attend a holiday event, and when they did not show up as expected, family members contacted Wakefield Police and requested a welfare check.

When officers arrived, they made a forced entry after finding no signs of activity, and found the bodies. Wakefield firefighters were called in and found elevated carbon monoxide levels in the house.

Ten CO deaths this year

Toomey said the latest deaths bring the total number of lives lost to carbon monoxide poisoning in New Hampshire this year to 10,



“To lose a whole family of four right in the peak of the holiday season, it hits home even more.”

SEAN TOOMEY
State Fire Marshal

when typically in a year there are two or three.

Toomey said a “stress debriefing session” was held Thursday night in Wakefield for first responders to talk about the incident.

“Our office, unfortunately, has to respond to all fire deaths and carbon monoxide deaths in the state,” Toomey said. “This has

been a terribly tragic year for both fire deaths and carbon monoxide deaths. I think it wears on all of us. It comes at a terrible time of year — the holidays, during which we spend time with family and friends.

“So to lose a whole family of four right in the peak of the holiday season, it hits home even more.”

The State Fire Marshal’s Office offers the following tips for making sure the carbon monoxide alarms in homes are maintained and working properly:

- Install and maintain carbon monoxide alarms in a central location outside each separate sleeping area, on every level of the home, and in other locations, as required by laws, codes, or standards.
- If you have combination

smoke/carbon monoxide alarms, follow the directions for smoke alarm installation.

- Test carbon monoxide alarms once a month and replace them if they fail to respond correctly when tested.

- Replace the carbon monoxide alarm according to manufacturer’s instructions or when the end-of-life signal sounds.

- Know the difference between the sound of the carbon monoxide alarm and the smoke alarm, and each alarm’s low-battery signals. If the audible low-battery signal sounds, replace the batteries, or replace the device.

Anyone with information that may assist the investigation is encouraged to contact the State Fire Marshal’s Office at 603-223-4289 or fmo@dos.nh.gov.

pfeely@unionleader.com

Citizen of the Year

To honor his humanitarian efforts through the decades, the New Hampshire Union Leader is naming Alex Ray its Citizen of the Year for 2024.

“Alex Ray is a shining example of how one individual can make a great impact. It is hard to find a Granite Stater who has not been positively impacted by his good works which now spread around the globe,” said Brendan J. McQuaid, president and publisher of the New Hampshire Union Leader and Sunday News.

Ray’s Common Man empire stretches from Windham to Lincoln. The list features 15 restaurants, four inns, a spa, a company store, The Flying Monkey Movie House and Performance Center in Plymouth, The Barn On The Pemi wedding and event center in Plymouth as well as Common Man Roadside locations.

As he approaches 80 years old, Ray is preparing to turn the operation over to some of his senior staffers.

‘Gold standard’

Last month, Common Man catered a free Thanksgiving dinner before the holiday at Harbor Care Health & Wellness Center in Nashua for more than 300 people, drawing state and federal office holders to help serve meals.

“I think he is the gold standard of business owners in terms of giving back,” said former Gov. John Lynch, a friend of Ray’s for decades.

“For Alex, it’s not just about making money and earning profits. It’s using that money to help other people,” Lynch said. “I think that’s a wonderful example that other businesses could follow and maybe do follow.”

Last summer, Lynch and his wife, Susan, went on a mission with Ray to Ukraine. Susan Lynch also organized New Hampshire residents to knit 250 caps for Ray to bring with him to Ukraine this month.

“What drives Alex is Alex just wants to make a difference in people’s lives,” John Lynch said. “He isn’t in it for glory or recognition.”

During a phone interview with a reporter, Lynch was interrupted by a call from Ray, whose plane had landed in Krakow, Poland, on his way by truck convoy to Ukraine — his 12th trip.



Alex Ray sits by the fireplace at the Common Man Inn & Spa in Plymouth on Dec. 6. The facility is one of four inns under the Common Man umbrella, along with 15 restaurants, a theater, an event center and the two Interstate 93 rest areas in Hooksett.

DAVID LANE/WUNION LEADER

Lynch noted that Ray calls using WhatsApp because “the Russians monitor their cellphone usage.”

Through the decades, Ray has hosted fundraising nights for fire victims and traveled to hurricane-ravaged areas armed with supplies.

His contributions are incalculable, said Susan Mathison, who has traveled with Ray as one of four founders of the Common Man for Ukraine effort.

“You know some things that he has done. I know some things he has done. No one knows everything he has done,” Mathison said. “He’s doing it to do good. He is not doing it to look good.”

Hospitality giant

Mike Somers, president and CEO of the New Hampshire Lodging & Restaurant Association, said Common Man is a giant in the hospitality industry.

The Common Man is “the largest New Hampshire-based company in our industry, I believe,” Somers said.

“Obviously, he’s been incredibly influential in the hospitality industry in New Hampshire for decades,” Somers said. “Clearly, he has been a leader in charitable giving, all the philanthropic work he has done, whether giving back

to local communities where his restaurants are based or other nonprofits or going to Ukraine and supporting feeding people in need. He’s done that for years and years.”

Through his early adult years, Ray graduated from cooking school and traveled as a salesman selling pots, silverware and stoves to restaurants.

He set up a “pizza and beer” place to capture skiers along Route 3 after knocking on doors asking, “Can I rent your barn?”

Ray opened his first Common Man restaurant on Main Street in Ashland in 1971. It was on the first floor of Ray’s home. The dining room served 35, and patrons had to wait outside in the elements for an open table.

In 2009, Ray bought a former movie theater on Main Street in Plymouth and renovated it, attracting musical acts, comedians and films to the Flying Monkey.

About a decade ago, Ray opened new welcome centers on both sides of Interstate 93 in Hooksett with Common Man Roadside eateries.

A cafe and dine-in restaurant went into the new Tru by Hilton Manchester Downtown in the Millyard in 2022.

Lisa Mure, his life partner for 13 years, has traveled with Ray on

his trips to Ukraine.

“He is driven by wanting to do the right thing,” Mure emailed from Ukraine on the latest trip this month.

Strong curiosity

Not bad for a New Jersey boy who moved to Eaton Center at age 14, graduating from Kennett High School in North Conway a year late in 1964.

“I was such a terrible student,” Ray recalled. During class, “I’d be looking out the windows.”

He says he wondered “how everything is made,” saying he had “a high level of curiosity” that he carries with him to this day.

During a 90-minute interview, Ray wondered why five workers were using hammers that morning to nail trusses as part of his Kanc Diner in Lincoln.

“What the hell? Today, they should be using air guns and glue, not five guys in the cold wind,” Ray said.

“He’s curious about everything,” Mathison said. “To define Alex Ray is to be curious about everything, how everything works, how it can be improved.”

She recalled one time when Ray was talking to the Ukrainians about how a building’s furnace worked. “The guys are speaking Ukrainian and making hand

gestures,” Mathison said.

“He’s just a genius,” she said. On his Ukraine trips, Ray is “absolutely hands-on,” Mathison said. He’ll be sitting in the front seat of one of several trucks in a convoy bringing food and supplies from a warehouse in Poland to the Ukrainian people.

“He’s organizing people to get food. He’s organizing kids to make an assembly line” to unload the trucks, Mathison said.

Ray said he doesn’t worry about the dangers of entering a war zone.

“It’s more risky to walk across the street in this town during the daylight than it is to worry about getting hurt in any of the war,” he said.

Many towns in Ukraine have memorials to residents killed in the war. In one village, the memorial feature photos of 300 people. Ray remembered seeing a couple approach one photo.

“Each of them went up and kissed their son,” Ray said. “That tore into us.”

Happier times include making pizza and playing soccer with the Ukrainian children, many of whom had lost one or both parents.

“These kids didn’t have a right to be so happy,” Ray said.

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DAVID LANE/WUNION LEADER

Alex Ray poses with his rescue dog, Millie, during an interview earlier this month in Plymouth.



PROVIDED BY THE COMMON MAN

Ray’s humanitarian efforts are not limited to New Hampshire or even Ukraine. Here, he works in a restaurant kitchen in the Bahamas while volunteering with World Central Kitchen’s relief efforts following Hurricane Dorian in 2019.

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