



Yanney roasters no match for a truly nice guy

By Anne Walsh, Communications Committee

Roasters assembled to tease business legend Mike Yanney faced a conundrum at the sold-out “Face on the Barroom Floor” event Nov. 18.

“It’s very difficult to roast a squeaky-clean guy. Mike has no dark habits. No dark past, no double life, no mean-spirited comments about anyone. He’s given the roasters almost nothing to work with,” lamented his son-in-law, Bill Roskens, managing director, First Care Companies.

It was a sentiment shared by John Nelson, chairman of the SilverStone Group, who quipped, “One of the peculiar things of American culture is honoring people by roasting them, skewering them and humiliating them. I find it difficult to say negative things about Mike – difficult, but not impossible.”

And so the roasters did their best on a night that Tom O’Connor, former Face on the Barroom Floor Committee chair, described as “a remarkable event. There’s never been a crowd like this. It means the world to us.”

State and city business leaders, educators, administrators, government officials and medical experts laughed at Yanney’s foibles, but also heard far more about his remarkable life, business acumen, family, and philanthropic contributions to Nebraska and Omaha.

“He’s a global leader, has relentless drive and energy, and endless friendships. Given all the things he does from morning till noon to night, seven days a week, it’s hard to believe he can be that focused and detail oriented about every aspect,” said Dr. Jeff Gold, UNMC chancellor and executive vice president and provost, NU system.

Dr. Gold said Yanney and his wife, Dr. Gail Walling Yanney, were among the first people he met when being recruited to Nebraska by J.B. Milliken, former NU president. “I will never forget the evening we spent with them, and my wife, Robin, said, ‘This job’s for you.’ Mike’s community values are incredible; he’s a convener and visionary, with incredible energy and enthusiasm. I don’t hold a candle to what Mike and Gail do in this community.”

Former Omaha World-Herald columnist Mike Kelly, emcee for the roast, is publishing a book on Yanney, the chairman emeritus of Burlington Capital.

“I’m glad to be finished – I interviewed 125 people, begging them for dirt, but just kept hearing about how great he is, how humble, blah, blah,” he said.

Kelly described Yanney’s early beginnings, growing up the youngest of nine children in Kearney, Nebraska. The family was poor, and young Mike sold vegetables from a little red wagon. He was proud of his Lebanese ancestry and received his undergraduate degree in 1955 from the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

“Mike and Gail met on a blind date in Denver, where Mike had started his banking career. Mr. Smooth said, ‘Just so you know, I’m not interested in a relationship.’ And she said, ‘What makes you think I’m interested in a relationship with you?’ They got engaged four days later,” recapped Kelly.

She returned to Omaha for her final year of medical school – one of only three women in her class – and they wrote love letters. She sent a card. The cover said, ‘I know I’m not your speed,’ and the inside said, ‘but I could slow down a little.’”

Yanney and Walter Scott, former CEO of Kiewit Corporation who passed away in September, were “thick as thieves, bosom buddies and schemers up to no good all the time,” said W. David Scott, CEO of Tetrad, a real estate and investment firm, and son of Walter.

Although out of town in Ireland, Scott arranged for a video featuring numerous photos of Yanney, which he narrated from A to Z. Many of the letters focused on a habit noted by other roasters – Yanney’s ability to fall asleep virtually anywhere – and his love of fishing.

“E is for electrifying. Mike, you are sleeping all the time, you take naps left and right, you are not electrifying,” Scott said. “F is for fishing. You will notice from these photographs that Mike never touches the fish. He has a fear of touching the fish. Either that or you don’t like the smell on your hands.”

Son-in-law Bill Roskens described Yanney’s nonstop work ethic, the pace of which may have something to do with the odd nap.

“Most of you are keenly aware of the exact moment when Mike’s consciousness leaves your topic and settles into something else. Who knows what trumped you, and frankly, who cares? The fact of the matter is, it’s over. My advice is just to stand up and exit the area, even if you are in mid-sentence. He won’t notice because he’s already on the phone.”

Lisa Yanney Roskens, chairman and CEO of Burlington Capital, and daughter of Mike and Gail, said she was not aware of her unusual upbringing until she was older. “In kindergarten, I had no idea that other children didn’t spend the days leading up to the start of school making a list with their father about goals for the coming year.”

While in high school, she thought her father had a good command of the English language because he helped her with essays and speech writing, but soon discovered he stumbled over a few key words.

“Like ‘little.’ Let’s build a little park. Have any of you been called into his office to work on a little project?” asked Lisa. “Another word, a ‘few.’ Let’s invite a few people over. Let’s get a few turkeys in the backyard. Does anyone in Omaha not see turkeys in their own backyards as a result of the few turkeys he experimented with 40 years ago?”

Yanney traveled to the Soviet Union/Russia more than 150 times during his business career, and hosted Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin on a tour of the Nebraska Sandhills in 1977.

He and his business partners once owned eight companies with thousands of employees there, Kelly said, but since 2007 has not operated in Russia.

“An exceptional businessman, an international one, he’s been extolled, worked in the Soviet Union under surveillance from the CIA, served on 15 corporate and international boards, yet his greatest achievements are overshadowed by his interest in helping people,” Nelson said. “The spark that Mike and Gail put in this community, this state and this nation is fantastic.”

Unveiling his first caricature for the Omaha Press Club, editorial cartoonist Jeff Koterba called the experience humbling and an honor. His illustration depicts an impeccably dressed Mike wearing an Aksarben crown, holding a fishing rod while sitting atop the WoodmenLife Tower with Gail, Lisa, Bill, grandchildren Charles and Mary, and Walter Scott.

Explaining that Mike and Gail live on the tower's 28th floor, Koterba added that Mike's "done so many things, it's tough to get them all in."

Included are the little red vegetable wagon, farm silos and Russian onion domes, as well as the many organizations supported by the Yanneys. The Woodmen's peregrine falcons fly with a banner listing his other honors, including the Horatio Alger Award.

Finally, the 166th "Face" had his say, and in typical fashion, it was brief and insult-free.

After praising emcee Kelly's work on his book (commissioned by Lisa), Yanney said: "Every one of us in this room are very lucky people. We didn't pick our parents, we didn't pick this country, and think of how lucky we are today. It's a democracy that's unparalleled in any place in the world, and every one of us should thank God every day that we are in this really great country. I thank all of you, you really have touched me tonight. God bless you and have a safe trip home."