The perils of letting people preach on a bus

BY ELAINE HESSER

Great Lives

Alan Perlmutter: from corporate offices to a chair in the river

FROM A third-floor apartment in the Washington Heights neighborhood of Manhattan, Alan Perlmutter could walk to the Hudson River. But he couldn’t name more than one of the building’s other tenants. They were strangers, and that was just the way things were. He worked for his family’s business, the St. Regis Paper Company of New York City, with a paper mill in North Tonawanda.

“We recycled paper,” he said. “We made 40 tons of paperboard daily from scrap paper and boxes — and this was 60 years ago.”

Perlmutter graduated from Cornell University’s College of Agriculture with a degree in food science and technology — which at the time meant he’d studied how to freeze food for commercial use. From 1953 to 1955, he served in one of the Army’s Domestic anti-aircraft units, helping to keep Pittsburgh, Penn., safe for democracy. “Thankfully, we never had to fire a shot!” he added.

Perlmutter eventually built an international business as a management consultant. He helped him get on his feet and making the resort a casual, comfortable retreat where guests famished for partner’s private chairs in the Big Sur River Inn to relax.

Perlmutter’s been active in the community since he helped form the Friends of the Big Sur Coast to fight federalization. When the government wanted to make Big Sur a national park, he and others like him feared that residents’ land and homes would be taken via eminent domain. Although Big Sur residents weren’t unanimous in resisting the takeover attempt, Perlmutter believes he did the right thing. And in the process, he said, “we became connected to the rest of the community.”

That wasn’t his only connection, however. When the Big Sur Health Center opened in the Grange Hall in 1979, Nancy was the first receptionist and Perlmutter was the first treasurer.

The family’s also helped support the Big Sur Volunteer Fire Brigade, of which he’s been a big fan — especially during this past winter’s inferno.

“The fire came within 10 feet of my house,” he said. “They saved it.”

He added that the fire brought out an example of what the community does best — come together and support each other.

For the former city dweller who didn’t know his neighbors, that sense of community is what Perlmutter values most. “My biggest reward is that I was able to raise my family here,” he said.

Nancy’s now a realtor with Sotheby’s, and at 82, Perlmutter, a grandfather, looks to the future: “I hope that my family will maintain their strong ties to each other.” He added, “I hope that after I’m gone, the River Inn will survive, grow and thrive. I hope it will continue as a stopping point in one of the most beautiful places on Earth.”

To suggest someone for this column, email elainehesser@gmail.com.