Politics, COVID and the search for truth: A death in a divided American family

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Steven St. Laurent’s son and widow sat at a dining room table to write his obituary in May. Most of it came easy. He was 67. He served in the Navy during the Vietnam War, achieved 15 years of sobriety, worked tirelessly for his family. He was obsessed with Ham radios and had an encyclopedic knowledge of cars and car conditioners. He was loved by many.

But two questions quickly arose: Did we say that he died of COVID-19? And should we mention the militia?

The obituary published May 10 mentioned the cause of death but omitted St. Laurent’s five-year membership in the New York Light Foot Militia. The reason for both omissions might seem familiar for those with families across the political spectrum in a divided country. It’s a country where two sides fail to agree on basic truths, where social media insulates us from one another. And should we mention a militia? At least two questions quickly arose: Did we say that he died of COVID-19? And should we mention the militia?

To others in his family, St. Laurent was an essential worker who faced death every day. To others in his family, he was an essential worker who cared so deeply about helping others but kept working during the peak of the coronavirus pandemic, even if he knew he was at risk. He attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and counseled newly sober alcoholics, fixed air conditioners and went to work. That commitment cost him his life, they say.

The dozen people who spoke to The Post-Standard about St. Laurent’s life and death all agreed on one thing: St. Laurent was a good man, and they wish you could have met him.

Matt St. Laurent, 37, lived with his dad and was a dead ringer for him, his parents said. The two had a bond of brotherhood.

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It was a message to his dad’s militia and friends who seemed to be minimizing the threat of the virus. He defended the virus. His condition worsened and, a day later, he was in the hospital emergency room. He died May 10.

ALLY Aly St. Laurent, 34, Steve’s daughter, is a self-described democratic socialist. She often disagreed with her father but knew him to be generous, intelligent and warm. Her relationship was close, especially since he got diagnosed with cancer years ago with his wife, Paula.

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“I’m getting emotional now. It’s just crazy that he’s gone,” she said. “It’s something you can’t understand or feel.”

In July, she was speaking with her mother and father on the phone.

“Hey, I’m not saying not to be careful,” he said.

“I can’t tell you how sick I am,” she said. “It just shows how dangerous this virus is, and that it can attack someone so quickly. I’m just so sick of all this.”

He never said this, but I could just tell from the way he was acting. He was doing it despite full knowledge of the risks. He also attended community health events, where he was looked to as a mentor, and to help.

He always wanted to help people,” Matt said of his father, Steve, above.

“I gotta keep doing this,” he said.

Steve St. Laurent on his wedding day 46 years ago with his wife, Paula.

A photo of the St. Laurent family.

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The meeting occurred about seven days before Steve started feeling sick. Yates, a county health official, said that they had enough data to conclude that the virus was spreading in the community.

“I’m really pushing, like, this is something that took my father away,” she said. “I’ve been talking to my friends, mainly militia group. I think they’re the types of people who are making these kinds of posts, saying it’s like the flu or something. They’re going to go back to work.”

Steve St. Laurent, whose dad, Steve, died of COVID-19 in May, was 67. He served in the Navy during the Vietnam War, achieved the rank of chief petty officer and worked as a hammer and had an encyclopedic knowledge of cars and air conditioners. He was loved by many.

Steve St. Laurent with a Volkswagen Beetle at age 16.
Steve’s Facebook posts show hints that this transformation ... his wife, Paula (blue sweater), his brother, Brian, left, and sister-in-law, Diane. Courtesy St. Laurent family

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Steve St. Laurent was born in February 1953 in East Syracuse, the second oldest of six kids.

His siblings describe a tight-knit family that dealt with great tragedy in different ways, a family that was spread apart over 20 years in age difference but still found ways to stay connected.

The family had gatherings at his brother Doug’s frame shop in Mallin or in the Adirondacks. Steve would try to get together at sister Sue’s cot-

tel in the Adirondacks near Lake Pla-

ty. They’d call each other on the phone as much as possible. Steve was always the guy to fix your fridge or AC.

Their father, Arthur, was a Canadian immigrant who served in the Royal Air Force and had an affinity for learning lan-
guages, according to his children. But he also had a strong sense of patriotism and fasci-

ation (ALS), a long and devastating process that took its toll on his children. But he

was the favorite sibling. Because their family was about strong, be kind

love yourself.