

Joseph Graw Legislator, insurance executive

Being 'Mr. Normandale' was his proudest accomplishment

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Joseph Graw looked a bit like movie star Clark Gable, but his work in the Legislature earned him another nickname: Mr. Normandale.

As a Conservative (roughly the equivalent of today's Republican) legislator from Bloomington, Graw introduced legislation to create a network of suburban junior colleges and then lobbied to locate one

of them in his hometown.

Decades later, Normandale Community College students working at his nursing home christened him "Mr. Normandale" after Graw told them about his ties to their school. "He told everybody what he did," said his son, Joe Jr., of Remer, Minn. "He loved [the nickname] — he just glowed."

Graw died of pneumonia Aug. 29 at his Bloomington nursing home. He was 103.

Graw was born in Knoxville, Iowa, in 1915. His father, a coal miner, died when a boulder fell on him, leaving 3-year-old Graw and five older siblings to be raised by their mother. As a child in Iowa and Wisconsin, Graw "took out every book he could get his hands on" and dreamed of being an architect, said his son, Mike, of Bloomington. After high school, he moved to Chicago to work in the insurance business with his brother, went to college for a while and then left to join the Army Air Corps in 1941.

He found himself headed to Pearl Harbor, but instead of flying there he was sent by ship. It may have saved his life, since many of the others in his squadron were already on the ground and were killed during the Japanese air raid.

Eventually he was sent to Brisbane, Australia, where he met Dorothy McCormack. "I think it was love at first sight, but the courtship took a while," said Joe Jr., recalling how Dorothy's father and the parish priest fully investigated

the Yank before the two got married in 1943.

Graw, who was badly injured in a Jeep explosion soon after the wedding, never spoke about the brutality he saw in the war. The couple moved to Bloomington, where they bought 23 acres on the city's west side. "You couldn't have dragged him out of [Bloomington] with a crane," Joe Jr. said. Graw began a successful career as an insurance executive, opening more than 20 offices and often traveling for work.

The Graws were founding members of Nativity of Mary Catholic Church in Bloomington, and he played an important role with the parish's annual carnival, held to help pay off the church's mortgage and fund later projects.

In 1962 Graw was elected to the Legislature, representing a House district that was for the first time exclusively Bloomington. Diane Darr, who did research for the campaign, said Bloomington residents were "so excited to get our own representative."

His proudest political accomplishment was co-authoring legislation that created five junior colleges in the Twin Cities, including the school that became Normandale.

His reasons for promoting suburban junior colleges, an idea some considered outlandish, were personal and civic, said Darr. "He had ... a difficult time finding education for himself," she said. "He just felt this was a responsibility we had as a state to provide opportunities close to home."

Graw, who served more than a decade in the Legislature, worked in later years as a broker buying and selling small businesses in St. Louis Park. He survived his wife by 12 years, and Mike Graw said he attributed his longevity to eating only meat and potatoes and taking daily naps.

Normandale this year is celebrating its 50th anniversary, Darr said, and college officials invited Graw to visit the campus just a week before he died. "It was like he got to see his jewel," she said. "It was such a moving day for him."

Besides his sons, Graw is survived by a daughter, Margaret Graw, of Alberta, Calgary; six grandchildren and 12 great-grandchildren. Services have been held.

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— Joseph Graw Jr.