

Fueling Conversations

Several weeks ago, Western New York lost a prominent member of the business community who served his hometown well throughout his professional career by providing his leadership to a variety of regional economic development, civic, and cultural initiatives.

Mark Hamister, formerly the Chairman and CEO of The Hamister Group LLC, a healthcare and hotel management company, grew up in Kenmore, N.Y., and was a graduate of the Rochester Institute of Technology. He was highly recognized and honored throughout his career for being a “consummate businessman” who had a quiet way of supporting issues and making things happen. This past weekend, Mark’s children shared that he died from COVID-19 and was unvaccinated.

Hamister viewed COVID-19 as a “bad flu,” and was more concerned about the potential effects of the vaccine than those of the virus. He died on Aug. 20 at only 69 years old after two weeks at Millard Fillmore Suburban Hospital. He had discovered that he was infected only 17 days earlier and declined rapidly. I share this out of concern for all of you as we are seeing a growing number of illnesses – some serious – among our National Fuel colleagues that are unvaccinated.

Hamister’s children recently told their father’s story to The Buffalo News, hoping their loss changes minds about vaccinations. Their story is powerful. Please take the time to read it below.

Mark Hamister died, unvaccinated, from Covid-19. His children hope his story changes minds.

By Stephen T. Watson

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Katie Hamister talked to her father, Mark, the Buffalo business leader, regularly by phone. So it wasn’t unusual that he called her on the morning of Aug. 3.

It’s what he told her that was jarring.

He had tested positive for Covid-19.

Within two days, his condition had deteriorated so rapidly his doctor urged him to get to the emergency room. Hamister, 69, went to Millard Fillmore Suburban Hospital and never left, spending the last two weeks of his life lying in a hospital bed, straining to get enough oxygen into his lungs.

The final time he saw Katie and her twin brother, Dan, they were dressed in hospital gowns, surgical gloves, masks and goggles, unable to feel his skin when they held his hand.

Before he died, Hamister told his daughter he realized he had made one grave mistake.

“He said he regretted not getting vaccinated,” Katie Hamister said. “It was his biggest regret. But it’s too late at that point. You can’t turn back.”

Mark Hamister was one of Buffalo Niagara’s most influential business executives.

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Founder, chairman and CEO of the Hamister Group, a major operator of hotels and assisted living facilities, Hamister served on numerous community boards and once tried to buy the Buffalo Sabres.

But the man his son calls the smartest person he knew didn't view Covid-19 as a public health crisis, didn't believe he would get seriously ill if he got infected with the virus – and didn't trust the vaccine.

Dan and Katie Hamister are convinced he would have survived – or never caught the virus in the first place – if he'd received the Covid-19 shot.

That's why they agreed to share their private grief with the public. They hope it will convince people who have hesitated to get vaccinated to change their minds.

The siblings say they don't want another family to endure the death of a parent or loved one as they have.

"This was preventable. That's the worst part about it, and probably the most frustrating. This was preventable," Dan Hamister said in the joint interview conducted in their late father's office in the company's headquarters in downtown Buffalo. "Had he gotten it, he'd most likely still be here."

'A lot of Buffalo pride'

A Town of Tonawanda native, Hamister used a credit card and loans from his father and uncle to buy his first senior living residence in the late 1970s. He ended up growing the Hamister Group, which later included a string of hotels, into a company with more than 500 employees and annual revenue of \$80 million.

Over the years, he served as a close adviser to former County Executive Joel A. Giambra, as chairman of the Buffalo Niagara Partnership and as a member of the University at Buffalo Foundation, Empire State Development Corp. and other business and nonprofit organizations.

He was a prolific contributor to political candidates, primarily Republicans at the local and national level, who gained his greatest public notice for his unsuccessful bid to purchase the Sabres in the early 2000s to keep the franchise in Buffalo.

"He was born here and he had a lot of Buffalo pride, I'll call it," Dan Hamister said of his father, who later became a resident of Florida but spent summers in this area.

He may have been a pillar of the business community, but to Dan and Katie Hamister he was their father first and foremost.

The twins, 42 years old and born 45 minutes apart, who have an older sister, both have roles in the family business. Dan was serving as executive vice president and was in line to succeed his father later this year. Katie, who lives in Raleigh, N.C., is executive director of the Hamister Family Foundation.

"While we were lucky to grow up in this business, and that was clearly part of his life, he was so generous, whether it was his community or our friends growing up," Katie Hamister said. "I mean, if our friends couldn't afford a trip, he brought them with us."

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When they were younger, they said, he did whatever he could to attend their sporting events, even in two different cities in the same day. And he showed the same devotion to his grandchildren, a bond that helped ease the pain of the death of his wife, Sharon, in 2018.

They remembered him as a careful father – cautious to an extreme, even.

Dan Hamister recalled that his father wouldn't take them to the January 1993 Houston Oilers-Buffalo Bills playoff game – an instant classic dubbed "The Comeback" – because, two years after the Persian Gulf War, he was worried Saddam Hussein would attack the stadium.

"Yeah, if he could have bubble wrapped us all, and put us in a bubble to protect us, he would have," Katie Hamister said. "Which is interesting with this, right?"

Downplaying Covid-19

Mark Hamister didn't indulge in Covid-19 conspiracy theories but he did minimize the danger posed by the virus, according to his children.

"I think his view on Covid was more that this was a bad flu," Dan Hamister said, with Katie saying her father described it as "overblown."

He included social media as among the sources of incomplete information, or information that was subject to misinterpretation, that his father relied on, as well as more reliable outlets.

"He was a numbers person," Katie Hamister continued. "But when you're looking at the wrong numbers..."

He did follow basic Covid-19 safety protocols, such as wearing a face covering, depending on the situation, his children said. But he didn't worry too much about getting infected by Covid-19 and, if that did happen, he assumed he would come through it just fine.

When the vaccine was rolled out to the public, Mark Hamister did not get the shot, in part because he wasn't sure how safe it was over the long term, his children said.

"He had a lot of questions," Dan Hamister said.

Hamister didn't discourage his family from getting vaccinated – Dan, Katie and Hamister's 94-year-old mother are all vaccinated – but he deflected every effort by family members to change his position.

"I said, 'Dad, if you get this, this can ruin your lungs. You don't know how your body's going to react to this,'" Katie Hamister said of Covid-19, but he took solace in his overall good health.

Dan sent the final of several emails lobbying his father to get the shot in late July, after the family returned from a trip to Cape Cod, Mass.

"That was my last attempt," Dan Hamister said.

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A rapid decline

By early August, Katie Hamister was back in Raleigh following a trip to New York, a visit that included Sunday dinner with her father and grandmother.

Aug. 3, she got a call from her father, who told her he wasn't feeling well and, as a precaution, had taken a Covid-19 test that came back positive.

He called her because of the time they had spent together and he urged her to get tested, too. Katie Hamister's test came back negative, as did the test given to her grandmother.

"My dad said, 'I don't understand why you don't feel sick.' And I said, 'Dad, I got vaccinated,'" Katie Hamister said.

The family never pinned down how or when Mark Hamister got infected with the virus. But by Thursday, with Hamister struggling to breathe, he was on his way by ambulance to Millard Fillmore Suburban in Amherst.

His children tried to stay optimistic early on in Hamister's hospital stay. His only comorbidity making him more susceptible to the virus' effects, Dan Hamister said, was his age.

Hamister wasn't intubated or placed on a ventilator but doctors did work to raise his oxygen levels, first through a nasal cannula and then by connecting him to a Bipap machine.

But Dan Hamister said his father's lungs became inflamed and scarred, with one doctor describing the strain as the equivalent of running at a sprint for two straight weeks.

"He progressively got worse over time," Dan Hamister said.

Hamister's family could communicate with him through text messages or brief phone conversations, but it was hard to hear him clearly with the background noise from the Bipap machine and it was difficult for Hamister to talk.

After about two weeks, the medical staff moved Hamister from the Covid-19 wing to an intensive care unit.

For most of his time in the hospital, Hamister was alone save for the nurses and doctors who cared for him. But as the end approached, his family was allowed to visit him, first through a glass window and then in the room while fully dressed in protective gear.

"It's isolating. It is scary," Katie Hamister said. "My dad, who is bigger than life, he was scared."

He died on Aug. 20.

"When he could still talk to me, he said goodbye to me," Katie Hamister said. "And he said he loved me. He ended every conversation with, 'I love you.'"

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Touting the vaccine

The months ahead were setting up as happy ones for the Hamister family.

Mark Hamister had long planned to retire from day-to-day management of the company effective Nov. 1. And he would have turned 70 on Oct. 18, a milestone his children planned to mark with a suitable celebration.

"Now, it's a memorial," Dan Hamister said.

Dan Hamister said he will keep his own work space and won't move into his father's office, where the walls are lined with plaques, photos and other mementos of the elder Hamister's career and life.

"My office is across the hall. It's not moving. This is his office," Dan Hamister said.

Dan and Katie Hamister, who have four children between them ages 6 to 10, lament all that their father will miss in the years to come.

"Our dad's not going to be there to throw a football with his grandson. He's not going to watch anyone graduate high school," Katie Hamister said.

They're frustrated because, they believe, their father's death was avoidable. His wealth, his influence and his position in the community didn't save him but, the twins say, the vaccine would have.

Getting the shot is tantamount to a civic duty, they added, particularly to help protect children who aren't yet old enough to get the shot themselves.

"Disinformation is deadly," Dan Hamister said. "And a vaccination can save your life."

By the time their father recognized his error, it was too late.

But, they say, it's not too late for others who are on the fence about the vaccine. Doctors and public health experts agree the Covid-19 vaccine is safe and it's the best way to slow the spread of the virus and to prevent serious illness if you are infected.

The Hamisters urged anyone unvaccinated to think of those who'd be left to mourn their death and make an appointment to get vaccinated. Even if just one person does this, sharing their story was worth it, Katie Hamister said.

"This is something that we will replay in our heads for the rest of our lives. We have someone who's a business leader, community leader and, most importantly, he was our dad. And we loved him like no one loved him," she said, her voice breaking. "And we miss him."