

John Marx: Swanson left Skip-A-Long family far too soon

It was 1978, and Sue Cooper had just started her career with the Skip-A-Long Day Care Center in Moline, teaching 4- and 5-year-olds.

In that class was a 5-year-old wannabe attorney named Christopher Swanson, who each day set up a witness chair and cross-examined his little brother, Steven.

"Chris was beyond his years," said Cooper, now the chief operating officer for Skip-A-Long. "He'd grill Steven about everything while he had him on the stand. Who knew that bright little boy would grow up to touch so many lives in such a wonderful fashion?"

Chris Swanson, much to the delight of the Skip-A-Long family, never became an attorney. After graduating with honors from the University of Illinois-Chicago, he returned to Skip-A-Long. He headed up the Moline center's programs for school-age kids, taught music and technology skills, and endeared himself to countless Quad-Cities families.

Chris Swanson died in his sleep Saturday past. He was only 35 years old.

"Oh, my, what a person he was," Cooper said, fighting back tears with laughter, attempting to explain Swanson's Skip-A-Long legacy.

She talked about how he stayed in Skip-A-Long's school-age program until he reached the maximum age of 13, and about how his mother, Aina, became a Skip-A-Long board member.

Then Cooper paused, struggling to compose her thoughts. She shared the story of Swanson showing up one day after his college graduation and asking for a job.

"He's sitting in my office, and I'm just thrilled he wants a job with us," Cooper said. "And Chris asks if I'll look at him as the little boy who grew up here, or as someone who just finished college and is ready for a career. What an amazing question.

"One part of me will always remember him as the little attorney, but another part will never forget how he gave his heart to everyone here. It was a pretty easy hire. I couldn't say yes fast enough."

Cooper said Swanson brought optimism, energy and the world of music to the Skip-A-Long family. The host of a Saturday-night request show on local radio station KCQQ-FM (Q106.5), Swanson once called in a major music favor to benefit the kids at Skip-A-Long.

At Swanson's request, Pat DiNizio, guitarist for the band The Smithereens, visited the Moline campus and shared his time and his music with the students.

"That was Chris making sure there was something cool for the kids to experience," Cooper said. "He calls in a favor, but the favor's to make music fun for young people, not himself."

Cooper said Skip-A-Long has established the Chris Swanson Music Legacy, a memorial to see to it that his dream of young people staying close to music lives on for years to come.

"So young with so much to give," Cooper said of Swanson. "You get kind of greedy when it comes to someone special -- you never want to stop benefiting from what they have to give.

"I wish we had the chance to still be greedy with Chris."