

REMEMBERING ALEX NEWTON: A life of adventure, a spirit of service

By Rick Crown and Betsy Wagenhauser Special to the Citizen, Jan 22, 2024



Alex Newton with his wife, Betsy, and children, Nicola and Simon

He was known by many names — Durham, Alex, Figg — or some other endearing moniker, but the common denominator was that he was extraordinarily kind, always upbeat, humble to a fault and wildly adventurous. If it was true he danced to the beat of a different drum, it was likely an African one.

And the drums are surely beating now in an uplifting yet sad cadence that mourns the loss of a remarkable human being. Alexander Durham Newton died peacefully on the evening of Jan. 15, 2024, at his longtime family

home, Bonar Hall. By his side as the final chapter of his extraordinary life's journey came to a close was his first wife of 33 years, Betsy, and their intrepid-in-their-own-right progeny, Nicola and Simon. By his side in spirit was the myriad ranks of the Friends of Alex (FOA) that included everyone he touched in his personal and professional life — a life that spanned five continents and too many countries to count.

Born and raised in Madison, GA, 79 years ago, Alex had a heart for service from an early age, beginning with high school mission trips to Peru. He loved his hometown of Madison, but always claimed he chose Brown University for his undergraduate studies as it was the option farthest away. Still, he eventually made his way back to the south to study law at Duke University.

With a law degree under his belt, Alex headed to NYC and Wall Street to practice law and continue to feed his adventurous spirit. Sailing and kayaking and tennis and running were the primary sports that fulfilled him most of his life, though he happily dabbled in a variety of high-risk endeavors. These included mountaineering, hang-gliding, paragliding, scuba diving, bungee jumping, skiing, surfing, and child-rearing. He was never one to shy away from a chance to learn something new and have fun doing it.

Despite the plethora of extracurricular activities, Alex was equally passionate about doing what he could to make a difference in the world. He traded in his suit and tie and fancy Wall Street lawyer job for a work shirt, dungarees, and a shovel, and spent 2 years in the remote Guatemalan countryside serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer. That stint set the stage for an eventual rewarding and successful career in humanitarian assistance with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

West Africa was Alex's first assignment as a newly minted Regional Legal Advisor. He spent two years in Mali and five years in the Ivory Coast and traveled regularly throughout the region as part of his job. A by-product of his extensive travels was his penchant for gathering in-depth travel information which he converted into well-regarded Lonely Planet travel guides for both West and Central Africa. He thus added travel writer to his growing list of accomplishments.

South America was the next work destination. Alex spent the next 4 years based in Quito Ecuador but continued traveling for work throughout the region. This time he collected more than travel information on the side. While on assignment in Lima Peru, Alex happened to stop by the South American Explorers' Club, an information network for travelers which was run by a woman named Betsy. Two and a half years later they were married. This time Alex added "spouse" to his list of accomplishments.

Now the real adventure began. There was a 5-year tour in Bangladesh with frequent work visits to Nepal. And a daughter, Nicola, was another proud accomplishment to go on the list. Four years in Kazakhstan followed — this time as Democracy Office Chief. Alex succinctly described his charge as "to bring democracy to the former Soviet states" which, as with all things, he did his best. His list of accomplishments grew to include a son, Simon.

After Alex was promoted to USAID Deputy Mission Director of Haiti, the family moved to the capital city Port-au-Prince. They lived there from 2000 to 2002 before returning once again to West Africa -first to Ghana with Alex serving as Deputy Director for three years and then four years in Mali as Mission Director. When that tour ended, Alex spent nearly two years in war-torn Afghanistan, with Betsy and the kids safely ensconced in Madison.

His "retirement" in 2012 lasted about five minutes. Alex then began a series of short-term contract assignments for USAID that took him back to Africa, and then to Indonesia, Egypt, Ukraine, and Timor Leste. In between assignments, he and Betsy managed the ongoing work on their Bonar Hall home, buildings and grounds, which seemed to keep expanding. Alex's love of old houses led him to rescue endangered structures and move them to the property, inspiring a friend to refer to them as "Alex's Architectural Petting Zoo."

Alex's list of accomplishments is endless. His lifelong work of making a difference in the world carries on; reverberates still. He was a great friend, compassionate mentor, loving husband, adoring father, and devoted son. He will be missed and remembered by all the lucky FOAs here in this community — and the world over.

Published in the *Morgan County Citizen*, Madison, GA, Jan. 22, 2024