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Charlie Rominger, voice for land, dies at 52

By Cory Golden/Enterprise staff writer

Celebrated for the environmentally friendly farming he did alongside his brothers, Charlie Rominger stood sentry at local land-use meetings.

In blue jeans and dusty boots, he fought an inch-by-inch battle for the county's future without raising his voice.

With his death from cancer on Oct. 15, Yolo County lost a determined advocate of farmland preservation and wildlife habitat restoration. A fifth-generation farmer and married father of two from Winters, he was 52.

"Even after he was done with his long work days, Charlie kept working — whether that meant planting hedgerows to host beneficial insects, or going to night meetings to hold real estate developers accountable for paving over farmland," said his widow, Cairn. "Protecting the land was his life's work."

Former U.S. Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard Rominger said his son felt passionately about the long-term sustainability of agriculture.

"He really did his homework before he got up before the Farm Bureau board, or the supervisors or the Winters Planning Commission," Richard Rominger said. "He wanted to do all he could to get the message out about the importance of agriculture and taking care of the environment."

"He believed that if the human race is going to survive, we have to do a better job of that. He believed too much these days was short-term thinking."

"He was a visionary — a philosopher who could repair a wheat combine and get it running again."

Charlie Rominger served on the Yolo County Farm Bureau board and as the longtime chairman of its land-use committee, as a two-term president of the California Association of Wheat Growers and as a member of the Yolo County Ag Futures Alliance.

In 2003 the Yolo Land Trust awarded him its Thomson-Rominger award (named for his father and Supervisor Helen Thomson) for being a "silent hero" of land preservation.

"Charlie's ideas were fresh, strong and always well-conceived and delivered," said Craig McNamara, a friend and fellow farmer. "He never shied away from saying what he truly believed, and he did it in a way that was both passionate and respectful of his audience."

Thomson said Rominger leaves "an enormous void" because of the respect he commanded from elected officials, farmers and environmentalists alike.

"Charlie recognized it does take alliances to get things done, that you can have a policy disagreement but you don't get anywhere by being disagreeable," she said. "He was stubborn, yes, but never disagreeable."

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disagreeable, she said. He was stubborn, yes, but never disagreeable. He was always kind, always patient."

Bob Schneider of the environmental group Tuleyome recalled how much he enjoyed hearing Rominger talk about holistic farm management.

"But, he didn't only talk about it," Schneider said. "He made it happen."

Rominger and his family did so on their 3,500-acre Rominger Brothers Farms. He created more than 20 ponds in the western Yolo foothills — ponds that provide water runoff retention and filtration, reducing soil erosion. It earned him the Central Valley Habitat award, Wings Over the Valley. In 2005, the Yolo Resource Conservation District gave him its Cooperator of the Year Award.

"He was always many steps ahead of us in his on-farm experimentation and ruminations on the future of ag and resource stewardship," said Paul Robins of the Yolo RCD. "He and his brothers have been a model of good, progressive, inventive farming."

Born in Woodland on May 28, 1954, to Richard and Evelyne Rominger, Charles Albert Rominger attended Union School, a wooden one-room schoolhouse, through fifth grade. In 1971, he graduated from Winters High School, where he was valedictorian of his senior class and played football, baseball and basketball.

By 1978, he had earned two bachelor's degrees from UC Davis, one in agricultural science and management, another in agricultural engineering.

Then he went home to work on the family farm, then named A.H. Rominger & Sons, taking charge of the 2,000-acre wheat operation.

One afternoon, in 1984, he came across a young girl crying beside an irrigation canal. Believing the girl's kitten had become trapped under a bridge, he waded into the canal, feeling around in the water. To his shock, he felt a child's hand. Rominger submerged himself completely and freed the drowning, unconscious child.

The boy lived, and Rominger was later awarded the California Attorney General's Certificate of Valor.

Rominger joined the Yolo County Farm Bureau board of directors in 1985 and the California Association of Wheat Growers board of two years later. Also in 1987, he was selected as the California winner of the National Soil and Water Conservation awards program and was named Yolo County's Outstanding Young Farmer of the Year.

In 1989, he married Cairn Adamson. The couple first met in 1970, when he was 16 and she was just 6. Her parents had dropped her and her younger sister off at their grandparents' house in Indiana for a visit. Rominger's parents, Richard and Evelyne, who were acquaintances of Cairn's grandparents, also were visiting while on a cross-country trip with their four teenage children.

"During our stay, Charlie and I became a team," Cairn said. "I remember him giving me a ride on his shoulders through a cornfield; it was a thrill to hold on to him. Years later, I asked him why he had paid attention to such a little kid. 'You were interesting to me,' he said. 'You may have been little, but you had big thoughts.'"

In 1999, Rominger and his brothers, Rick and Bruce, started Rominger Brothers Farms Inc., tending about 3,500 acres of safflower, sunflowers, tomatoes, alfalfa, wheat, grapes, corn and rice.

Rominger also co-founded Rominger West Winery in Davis with his friend, winemaker Mark West. The idea was born in late 2004, but they



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suffered a setback in October 2005, when a fire on Mare Island in Vallejo destroyed 1,100 cases of their 2004 vintage chardonnay and syrah stored there.

The grand opening of the new Davis winery on East Second Street will take place Saturday, Oct. 28.

Bruce Rominger said the brothers had a good working relationship, one where each pulled his weight.

They grew up sharing the same room, spent summers on the farm together and, for the past 25 years, worked side by side.

When they disagreed, there were never hard feelings.

Rominger was first diagnosed with widespread, terminal cancer in April, his wife said.

As he grew more ill, he continued to spend time on the farm, his younger brother said. On some days, their father or a friend would drive Charlie around the farm.

Less than a month ago, Bruce watched Charlie walk slowly along the rows, picking grapes and placing them in a bucket for testing.

For all the time he spent in meetings, the farm was Charlie Rominger's home.

There his daughter, Cienna, 11, worked with him in the vineyard and learned to use spread sheets on the computer.

There his son Aldo (named for the famous conservationist Aldo Leopold), who will turn 5 this Saturday, circled his dad, running around the shop.

"That's where his passion for those issues came from," Bruce Rominger said. "(Charlie) loved farming. He loved open space. He loved doing what he was doing. That's what drove him to preserve it — not just our farm, but all farms. He knew we could enhance environmental quality if we farm correctly."

Bruce Rominger said that — no matter how discouraging the struggle against development seemed to become — his brother was always, at heart, an optimist.

Now others will be needed to take his place.

"Everybody's going to step up," he said. "In the near future some of that may be motivated by Charlie's passing, but in the long run they'll do it because it's the right thing to do. There are a lot of very knowledgeable, passionate people in this county who care about those issues.

"Those kind of people don't give up."

In addition to his parents, wife, children and brothers, Rominger is survived by his sister Ruth Rominger and her husband Lars Tomanek of Morro Bay, his sisters-in-law Patricia and Robyn Rominger of Winters and a large extended family.

A memorial service for Rominger is scheduled for Friday, Oct. 27, at St. Anthony's Parish Center, 511 Main St. in Winters. The service will begin at 4 p.m.; a reception to follow.

In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to either the Charlie Rominger Farmland Preservation Fund, which has been established at the Yolo Land Trust, P.O. Box 1196, Woodland, CA 95776; or to the Winters Friends of the Library, in memory of Charlie Rominger, 201 First St.,

Winters, CA 95694.

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