

Cleveland graphic designer and arts supporter Mark Schwartz has died at age 57



Mark Schwartz in 2006. (Gus Chan, The Plain Dealer)

BY STEVEN LITT

Mark Schwartz, the Cleveland graphic designer whose firm, Nesnadny + Schwartz, earned a national reputation over the past 30 years, died Sunday at the Cleveland Clinic at age 57 after a brief battle with cancer.

Schwartz was an avid photography collector, and a trustee of the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Cleveland International Film Festival and the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland.

A statement released by Schwartz's family on Sunday said that his firm has "won over 1,800 national and international awards in the fields of marketing communications, electronic design, public relations, event and environmental graphics, investor relations, graphic identity and brand development, photography, illustration and graphic design."

Fred Bidwell, interim director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, called Schwartz's death "a huge loss for the community and the art world far beyond."

Bidwell said that "through his patronage, through the commissions that he led, for clients like Progressive [Corp.] and the Gund Foundation, he materially shaped the lives and careers of artists and brought amazing work to the forefront, combining design and fine art in an incredibly innovative way."

Bidwell, described Schwartz as "big, brash, bold, uncompromising. Some people would say [he was] larger than life, or in your face, and perhaps that may have offended some people. But he created more admirers by far. He just inspired people and drove them to do better things."

Typical of Schwartz's friendships with artist was his close rapport with contemporary American photographer, Lee Friedlander, who regularly visited and photographed at the Schwartz's home in Cleveland Heights.

In February of 2009, Friedlander visited Schwartz and his family to attend the opening of an exhibition on the photographer's work at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Instead of sitting down to lunch when he arrived, Friedlander asked Schwartz to drive him immediately to the ArcelorMittal steel plant in Cleveland's industrial Flats so he could take photographs.

The sun was shining, and Friedlander wanted to strike while the light was good.

"I'm a rolling tripod, at the very least," Schwartz said after the experience in an interview, describing himself as an accomplice eager to help Friedlander make photographs.

“We both have the maturity of 14-year-old boys,” he said.

The late Peter B. Lewis, who died in 2013, noticed Schwartz’s energy in 1982 when the then-24-year-old designer cold-called the president and CEO of Progress Corp. and offered to take photographs for the company’s annual report.

“I didn’t know any better,” Schwartz recalled in a 2002 interview. “What’s the worst that could happen? He’d say, ‘No.’ What I didn’t expect was that he’d answer his own phone.”

After they arranged a meeting, Schwartz decided to bid on designing the entire publication.

Taking a gamble, and admiring Schwartz’s brass, Lewis gave him the job, which was widely admired and led to continuing assignments from Progressive and a cascade of work from other firms in Ohio and around the country.

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FRED BIDWELL

It was, as Schwartz later recalled, the “Cinderella moment” that catapulted the then five-person firm to success.

Nesnadny + Schwartz’s annual reports for Progressive have won more than 300 national awards, according to the 2002 story in *The Plain Dealer*.

Other clients have included Eaton Corp.; General Electric; Ohio Edison; Jones, Day; Cleveland Clinic Foundation; University Hospitals of Cleveland; Cleveland Foundation; George Gund Foundation; Case Western Reserve University; Akron Museum of Art; and the Cleveland Botanical Garden, Center for Contemporary Art, Orchestra, Playhouse, Museum of Art, Institute of Art, Institute of Music and Zoological Society.

Clients outside Ohio have included the Seagram Co., Vassar College and Alfred A. Knopf in New York; Perkins School for the Blind in Massachusetts, International Paper in Connecticut and the International Spy Museum in Washington, D.C.

A native of Massachusetts, Schwartz grew up in New Jersey, and studied political science at Rutgers University. During his later studies at Princeton, he focused on fine arts and photography. He then earned a master of fine arts degree at The Ohio University.

Schwartz moved to Cleveland to teach photography at Cleveland State University, a job quickly claimed by budget cuts.



Lee Friedlander photographed Mark Schwartz at the wheel of his SUV in 2009 during a photo shoot in Cleveland’s industrial Flats. Courtesy Lee Friedlander.

Schwartz responded by starting a graphic design firm in January, 1980 with Joyce Nesnadny, whose job as a designer at the Greater Cleveland Regional Transit Authority had also been eliminated by budget cuts, according to a 1996 *Plain Dealer* article.

The article said that then-couple and longtime partners had been working on freelance projects together since they met as fine arts students at Ohio University.

The firm’s first client was University Circle, Inc.

Nesnadny later left Cleveland and opened a Toronto office for the firm, which also has an office in New York.

Schwartz is survived by his wife, Bettina (Tina) Katz; and daughters Sophie, 19; and Emma, 17.

At the Cleveland Museum of Art, Schwartz and Katz were the naming donors of the museum’s East Wing photography gallery, completed in 2009.

“I can’t think of an important visual arts organization he hasn’t touched,” Bidwell said of Schwartz and his philanthropy and work as a trustee.

“He had a quick wit and a big heart and was amazingly generous and loyal. It’s difficult to comprehend someone so incredibly vital being gone so quickly.”