On Christmas morning I was preparing to head to the airport to catch a flight home to New York when I received my annual holiday call from former heavyweight title challenger Chuck Wepner.

During his boxing career, which lasted from 1964 to 1978, Wepner compiled a 35-14-2 (17 KOs) record against such greats and notables as Muhammad Ali, George Foreman, Sonny Liston, Buster Mathis, Ernie Terrell, Duane Bobick, Joe Bugner and Manuel Ramos.

His nickname was the “Bayonne Bleeder,” which was a tribute to his hometown in New Jersey, as well as his propensity to bleed profusely but always finish on his feet.

But he is best known for being the inspiration for Sylvester Stallone’s “Rocky” character. In March 1975, the then 35-year-old Wepner challenged Ali for the heavyweight title in Cleveland.

Although he was given little chance of surviving past a few rounds, he is not only credited with knocking Ali down, he lasted into the fifteenth round.

Watching the fight on closed-circuit television was Stallone, who was then a struggling 30-year-old actor. Because he so identified with Wepner, who was holding down two full-time jobs at the time, he raced home to his hovel of an apartment and penned the first “Rocky” screenplay in just a few days.

Last year, Wepner, who had never been compensated for being the “Rocky” prototype, received an undisclosed settlement from Stallone after a well-publicized civil suit.

I became acquainted with Wepner about 15 years ago. While doing an interview with his colorful longtime manager, Al Braverman, the subject of Wepner naturally came up.

Without missing a beat, Braverman, who many people compared to a snarling dog, called Wepner’s home.

He left a message on the machine, instructing Wepner in no uncertain terms to treat me “like family.”

Within a day or two, I received a call from Wepner and was invited to his apartment in Bayonne, directly across from the venue where he had made his pro debut a few years after serving four years in the United States Marine Corps.

We have been friendly ever since, which only made me feel worse about his Christmas Day phone call. Every year I say I’m going to beat him to the punch, and every year he winds up calling me first.

And every time I call him, whether it is to ask him to autograph a bagful of boxing gloves to be

raffled off at a police benefit or to make an appearance at a Cigar Night or other charitable endeavor, nearly all of which he graciously attends, I reprimand myself for only calling him when I need something.

I always apologize, but he inevitably tells me not to worry, that he'd do anything for a friend.

Even though I've probably written 25 separate stories on Wepner for publications ranging from Playboy (Australia), Gallery, Hustler, Heartland, to scores of boxing publications and web sites, believe me when I tell you he's done a lot more for me than I could ever do for him.

Back in April 1996, when my first wife Frances, an active NYPD sergeant, was battling leukemia, our colleagues on the department hosted a fund raiser for us at the Ukrainian Hall in Manhattan.

Chuck and his lovely wife Linda showed up as the party was in full swing. Chuck even dragged Frances out on the dance floor.

One of my favorite mementos is a photo of the two of them whooping it up. It was taken by Teddy B. Blackburn and it appeared in the now defunct Flash/Boxing Update newsletter.

Their broad, beaming, warm and welcoming smiles, each of which complimented their partial Polish heritage, are both full of hope, love, joy and vitality.

To this day Chuck jokes that if he wasn't told who Frances was, he never would have guessed that she was the one with cancer.

Several days later, Frances had a scheduled bone marrow transplant, from which she never recovered. Less than three weeks after dancing with the "real life Rocky," she passed away.

Chuck and Linda were among the first mourners to attend the wake. They came early and stayed late and they kept a lot of people, myself included, somewhat loose during a very difficult time.

Over the years, I have seen the same kindness displayed by Chuck also shown by Linda. While working in a South Brooklyn detective squad in the early nineties, my partner and I would often have dinner at a restaurant in Staten Island where Linda was the bartender.

My partner was a spitting image of the "Detective Sipowicz" character played by Dennis Franz on the television series "NYPD Blue." When told that "Sipowicz" had serious health issues a few years back, she has never neglected to inquire about him.

At my behest, she even called him to see how he was doing. While he greatly appreciated the call, his lady friend did not, so I had to ask her to stop. To this day, one of the first things she always asks me is how "Sipowicz" is doing.

Linda's heart is as big as her husband's. One can only assume that it was passed down to her

by her father, a still regal, old school Italian gentleman at the age of 93. I've seen him several times over the years, and he always seems to be more youthful, buoyant and vibrant than he was the last time I saw him.

When Chuck told me that he and Linda were heading into Brooklyn to spend Christmas with him, I inquired about his health. Chuck told me that he was healthy as an ox and that he would be eagerly awaiting their arrival "with a knife and fork in his hand, ready to eat."

It's customary for me to get both nostalgic and grateful at Christmas time. As I ponder another year gone by, I also think of the limitless possibilities for the year ahead and acknowledge all that I have to be grateful for.

Among other things, in one way or another nearly every ambition or fantasy I ever had has been fulfilled.

My love affair with boxing is waning, but my love affair with boxers is stronger than ever. It is hard to get excited over the actual sport these days, with so many titles and too many managers or promoters who are unwilling to match their fighters against the best available competition.

For the most part, I believe that fighters are willing to fight almost anyone. That is what they do best. Managers are supposed to protect them from their own unbridled ambition. But lately, at the highest levels of the game, promoters call most of the shots and are all too often unwilling to put their meal ticket at risk.

The uninitiated might find it easy to dismiss Wepner as a glorified club fighter who got hit a lot but never went down. But he is so much more than that. His career was built on honesty, integrity, gritty determination, emotional resolve and the unwillingness to believe in the limitations so many others had projected for him.

Growing up without his father present, he could have gone many ways. Instead of opting for trouble, he chose to join the Marine Corps. Afterwards, instead of seeing himself as just a liquor salesman and a night security guard at General Electric – the jobs he held when he challenged Ali – he dared to dream big and clearly envisioned himself dethroning the man many still consider "The Greatest."

The seven weeks he spent in a Catskill Mountains training camp preparing for Ali was the only time he trained full-time in his life.

"I realized in those mountains that a miracle could really happen," he said. "I could become heavyweight champion of the world. I also realized that if somebody had been subsidizing me my whole career, things would have been different. I would have been a much better fighter. I never trained full-time for a fight in my life, except for Ali. And I fought the fight of my life against the greatest heavyweight in history."

"Chuck was the gutsiest fighter I ever met," Braverman once told me. "He was in a league of his own. He didn't care about pain or cuts. If he got cut or elbowed, he never looked at me or

the referee for help. He was a fighter in the purest sense of the word."

Wepner has always been as stand-up outside of the ring as he was inside of it. When he was busted by the Drug Enforcement Administration for delivering cocaine in 1985, he could have bought his way out of a 10 year prison sentence by becoming a snitch.

Wepner chose to do the time, and served two years in a maximum security prison as well as 20 months in an Intensive Supervision Program (ISP). From day one, he assumed full responsibility for his actions.

"I was a big shot everywhere I went," he said. "There was so much booze and broads. I was out of control, a crazy man. I had some heavy friends and was running with some crazy people. And everywhere I went, there was cocaine."

Regarding his actual arrest, Wepner explained, "My makeup would never allow me to be a rat. I did the crime and knew I had to do the time. I was ready to accept my punishment."

What he doesn't tell you right away is how many people from the law enforcement community realized his actions were an aberration, and lobbied to get him released into the ISP. None have regretted that decision.

Several years after being released from prison, Wepner attended an NYPD amateur boxing show as a celebrity guest.

At one point he entered the ring, took the microphone and told the raucous crowd how much he respected them and what a great job they were doing. He thanked them for inviting him and told him what an honor it was to be there.

"I'm a guy everybody can relate to," he told me afterwards. "Everybody gets in trouble at one time or another. And cops, especially New York cops, are real people. They work hard and play hard.

"I was a working stiff who finally got a break and took advantage of it," he added. "I outgutted and outballed my way through a boxing career and a prison sentence. I got everything I have on endurance and perseverance. And when I screwed up, I owned up to it."

As a writer, I couldn't ask for a better subject. As a regular guy, I couldn't ask for a better friend. After all these years, Wepner is still fighting the good fight. More importantly, he is still making everyone he comes in contact with feel better about themselves.

In my mind there is no better way to define a true champion than that.

Happy New Year, Champ.