

Elliott Wilbur; public housing champion

By Michele Richinick | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 11, 2012

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At the end of the workday, D. Elliott Wilbur encouraged his employees to leave the building and return home to their families.

“Let’s get out of this firetrap; it’s time to go home,” he would say, shooing everyone out the door to keep them from working through the evening.



ELLIOTT WILBUR

Balancing professional and family commitments with community responsibilities was important to Mr. Wilbur, who was involved in Concord affairs ranging from housing and town government to health care and singing with choirs.

“To me, he knew what was important,” said his daughter Rachel Conn of Newton, “and he could just focus.”

Mr. Wilbur died of a heart attack April 24 in his Concord home. He was 82.

After moving to Concord with his family in 1965, Mr. Wilbur began a 28-year career as a management consultant with Arthur D. Little Inc. in Cambridge.

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‘Where is it written that antisocial behavior is related to income?’

Elliott Wilbur, in a 1994 letter to

Specializing in new building materials and in developing solar heating panels domestically and worldwide, Mr. Wilbur rose to senior consultant and senior vice president of North American operations.

newspaper supporting low-income housing

“He was very highly respected,” said Everett Shorey, who worked at the company with Mr. Wilbur for 17 years. “He was a great person to have either leading your team or to work on your team.”

At ADL, Shorey said, employees built coalitions to work on projects.

“People loved working with Elliott,” Shorey said. “He was always straightforward, fair, and respectful. I don’t think I would have stayed in the business if it weren’t for the kind of culture that Elliott created in our group.”

Mr. Wilbur was born and grew up in Bryn Mawr, Pa. He graduated from the Haverford School in 1947 and from Haverford College in 1951 with a bachelor’s degree in engineering.

From 1952 to 1955 he served in the Navy.

He married Sara Winstead, who is known as Win, in 1955. Before settling in Concord, they lived in Georgia, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York while he built Air Force hangars for Luria Engineering and later developed prefabricated wall panels for Union Carbide.

“He knew construction from the ground up,” his wife said, adding that he built the family’s summer home on Little Deer Isle in Maine with two relatives.

Mr. Wilbur’s family owned land on Little Deer Isle, where he spent part of nearly every summer of his life.

While at Arthur D. Little, Mr. Wilbur took more than 160 trips around the world to help develop housing and commercial buildings. Along with traveling to European countries, he went to Japan, Ethiopia, and Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Wilbur even met once with actor Robert Redford, who was also interested in solar energy.

“He was so curious and always came home with stories that were so exotic,” his daughter said. “He was interested in everybody.”

In 1971, Mr. Wilbur wrote “Housing: Expectations and Realities,” a book about the intricacies of providing shelter.

That background led to his election to the Concord Housing Authority, on which he helped spearhead expansion of Everett Gardens elderly housing.

At one meeting, his daughter said, he told the crowd: “‘I’m not asking for a majority for low-cost housing. I’m asking for a unanimous vote.’

“And he got it,” she said.

In 1994, when the Housing Authority planned to build six family units, Mr. Wilbur wrote a letter that was published in the Globe’s NorthWest Weekly. Objecting to coverage that suggested most residents opposed the project, he addressed and dismissed potential hurdles point by point, including any idea that low- and moderate-income families might pose a danger.

“Where is it written that antisocial behavior is related to income?” he wrote. “I have been an elected town official for 16 years; some of the most unpleasant behavior problems I’ve seen, or been made aware of, were among the families of the wealthy and privileged!”

When Mr. Wilbur retired in 1993, he began serving as a management consultant to many nonprofit organizations through pro bono work for the Executive Service Corps, teaching strategic planning and board development to volunteer consultants.

“One of the reasons why I retired at 65 was because I was tired of administration and I wanted to do what I think I do best, which is consulting,” he told the Boston Business Journal in 1999. “So if I can continue consulting and have challenging assignments, I’ll

stay as long as my legs will carry me around.”

Mr. Wilbur also served two terms on Concord’s Board of Selectmen. In 1997, he became involved with Emerson Hospital, serving on its board for 12 years.

“He was interested and loved so many aspects of Concord,” his daughter said. “He used his expertise in housing in so many different arenas.”

Mr. Wilbur volunteered in a variety of capacities at Trinity Episcopal Church in Concord for five decades.

He had sung in choirs as a child, and his love for music continued throughout his life. He was a member of Trinity’s choir for 47 years and was a longtime member of the Concord Chorus, serving as president from 2009 until last year.

“There was this infectious involvement of music throughout our entire childhood, which continues to this day with our kids,” his daughter said.

In addition to his wife and daughter, Mr. Wilbur leaves two other daughters, Beth of Carmel Valley, Calif., and Ginnie Miller of Kansas City, Mo.; a son, Michael of Yarmouth, Maine; a sister, Elizabeth Hodges of Rosemont, Pa.; 10 grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

A memorial service will be held at 10:30 a.m. Saturday in Trinity Church in Concord.

Whenever it was time to leave the house, Mr. Wilbur used to play the “Waiting Song” on the piano, with each successive chorus more out of tune, signaling to his family that it was time to depart.

Mr. Wilbur also enjoyed Scottish, ballroom, and swing dancing.

“He was a great dancer,” his wife said. “I married him because of his sense of humor and his dancing.”

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