

Robert Carter, Fresno attorney and business leader, dies

By Rory Appleton
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Last week, 87-year-old Robert “Bob” Carter was dancing with his memory caregivers at Somerford Place of Fresno. Although Alzheimer’s had slowed his step, the Fresno attorney and business leader’s love of dance and zest for life persisted long beyond his diagnosis.

“He taught me and our daughters how to jitterbug,” Mr. Carter’s wife, Jean, said. “He would dance with anyone. He felt he was giving some of himself to others when he danced.”

Mr. Carter died from complications of Alzheimer’s in his home on Monday, surrounded by his wife of 66 years and three children. His legacy includes the formation of the Fresno Business Council, a Leon S. Peters achievement award and the personal enrichment of thousands of clients as part of Fresno’s oldest law firm.

Mr. Carter was born in Detroit, but moved with his family as a child to Southern California. They settled in Monrovia, and Bob and Jean met as youngsters and became friends.

After a stint as an Army paratrooper at the end of World War II, Mr. Carter came home and his infectious personality altered Jean’s life forever.

“I was engaged to someone else, but he told me, ‘You can’t marry him.’ My other plans went out the window, and Bob and I married in February of 1949.”

The wedding came as Mr. Carter was finishing his undergraduate degree at the University of California at Los Angeles.

“He actually said it was too difficult to keep driving across town to see me,” Jean said. “It took away from his studies. So he thought we better get married, and we eloped in Vegas — with our families’ blessings.”

Mr. Carter went on to law school at UCLA and worked as a U.S. attorney in the 1950s. It was this work that first brought him to Fresno, which didn’t have a U.S. attorney’s office at that time.

Mr. Carter served a stint as a visiting U.S. attorney and “fell in love with the people he met in Fresno,” Jean said.

“He really felt Fresno could be something,” Mr. Carter’s daughter Chris Kellett, added. “Other people stick their nose up at Fresno, but he really felt Fresno could be something. He was always trying to bring businesses, speakers and energy here.”

The Carters made Fresno their permanent home in 1957 when he took a job as a Fresno County deputy district attorney. But two years later, Mr. Carter turned his focus to private practice and enriching Fresno’s business community.

“Bob was a real renaissance man,” said Deborah Nankivell, CEO of the Fresno Business Council. “He saw this missing piece in Fresno business and civic leadership, and I don’t think the council would have started without him.”

Nankivell said Mr. Carter raised money and demanded that people join the council, which is designed to align resources to tackle large, complex community issues such as poverty, mental health and education.

Robert Carter started the Fresno Business Council in 1993.

Mr. Carter won the prestigious Leon S. Peters award in 1997. The award recognizes local business leaders for their overall achievements and contributions to the Fresno community.

Mr. Carter was a partner in Wild, Carter & Tipton, a Fresno law firm that has handled business and real estate litigation for more than 120 years. Although he was an attorney, friends and colleagues are quick to note Mr. Carter's commitment to other ways of compromise.

"Bob Carter was a visionary," said Robert Oliver, a retired Fresno County Superior Court judge who worked with Carter for 22 years. "He understood the benefit of resolving litigation matters without the cost, angst and uncertainty of a trial."

Oliver said that Mr. Carter's leadership at the firm was consistent and filled with great respect for his attorneys and staff members, whom he got to know very well.

Oliver added that the Carter household was a haven for all — a place where Mr. Carter and his wife cooked gourmet food for all and entertained guests almost daily.

Jean Carter said that her husband's love for cooking extended to several trips to France for lessons at French cooking schools.

The Carters also took in foreign exchange students while raising their three children. Many of their European vacations were actually visits to the homes of former exchange students, who Jean said "became like family to us."

Although much of Mr. Carter's life was dedicated to business and the law, which Jean joked was a "jealous mistress" during their long marriage, his family remembers a giving spirit that lasted until the end.

We loved sitting by the fire and hearing him tell stories — even into adulthood.

Chris Kellett, Robert Carter's daughter

"He always wanted to overcome Alzheimer's," said Kellett, Carter's daughter. "He went to a UCLA clinic to try and help science — even though he realized he couldn't get better himself."

The surviving Carters praised the staff at Somerford Place, where Mr. Carter resided for about a year after his family could no longer care for him. The lively 87-year-old was up and about until the last few days of his life, when he moved back home.

"He left this world with a smile," his wife said.

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Robert G. Carter

Born: Oct. 1, 1927

Died: June 1, 2015

Occupation: Attorney

Survivors: wife Jean, daughters Kitty Burden and Chris Kellett, son Tom and five grandchildren

Memorial: 4:30 p.m. June 13 at Saint Columba Church

Remembrances: Mary S. Easton Center for Alzheimer's Disease Research, 10911 Weyburn Ave., Suite 200, Los Angeles CA 90095

