



Birch Bayh-Richard Lugar
**GOVERNMENT
LEADER OF THE YEAR**

THE PEOPLE'S MAYOR

Henry Leaves Lasting
Legacy on Fort Wayne

By Matt Ottinger

Fort Wayne Mayor Tom Henry's passing in March came just one month after he announced his diagnosis of stomach cancer. All reports indicate he anticipated having much more time.

What's more, he was preceded in death by his wife, Cindy, who had just passed away in January from pancreatic cancer. She too was widely known and liked and could be seen regaling patrons at the Green Frog Inn, the local bar she owned for 20 years.

It was assuredly a difficult time for family, which includes their two children and four grandchildren, friends and no doubt, a city. But a year that began with mourning can conclude with celebration.

The Indiana Chamber of Commerce is posthumously presenting Mayor Tom Henry with its 2024 Birch Bayh-Richard Lugar Government Leader of the Year award. Not just for the past year, but for an entire tenure characterized by economic progress and development that will be remembered for improving the quality of life of his constituents in many ways.

A brother and friend

Henry's death was a jarring loss for the state's second largest city – a city in which the mayor was deeply entrenched.

Prior to his mayorship, he served five terms on the Fort Wayne City Council. And before that, what stands out in his biography was that he only left Fort Wayne to serve four years in the U.S. Army, having attended Fort Wayne's Central Catholic High School and then the University of St. Francis.

Mayor Henry's brother, Jerry, president of Midwest Steel Group, was the oldest of the family's 17 children. Tom was a year younger and the second oldest.

When asked why Tom stayed in Fort Wayne nearly his entire life, Jerry puts it bluntly.

"Well, I'd have to say it's probably because we were poor," he offers. "It takes money to go away to college or go away on a search to find yourself. Some people claim they want to do that, but we had a big, poor family."

In recent memory, the duo got lunch together each Friday, normally at a local restaurant. Although, Jerry notes, finding grilled cheese and soup during Lent at restaurants would prove to be a challenge.

"When you have a close sibling like that, you get two bites of the apple," Jerry remarks. "You get a best friend, and you get a brother, too. We had a good run together. We shared a lot of things."



Young or old, Mayor Henry had an innate knack for relating to all of Fort Wayne's citizens, according to his family and friends.



Not just memories, but he notes the two shared clothes, bikes, cars and more during their lifetimes.

Matters of faith

Mayor Henry's aforementioned faith would play a major role in his life – as it had for everyone in his family. He was a member of Most Precious Blood Catholic Church and the Knights of Columbus, among other organizations.

"We were all raised by a devout Catholic mom and dad," Jerry reflects, noting the family would sometimes pray the Rosary together. "They were good witnesses. They made sure we were all baptized and went through all the sacraments together."

Jerry remembers his father, who worked for Catholic Charities and was an admired social worker, arguing with the priest about the proper

attire for baptisms and first communions.

"We couldn't afford all these sport coats and fancy clothes," he relays. "(Our father) said, 'God doesn't care what you're wearing for a first holy communion.'

"It was a little tough going sometimes, but our faith played a big role; in fact, all my brothers and sisters are active practicing their religion," he adds. "And it comes from example."

Jerry shares that the family only moved a couple of times, but made sure there was a Catholic church in walking distance from the new home.

Family loyalty was also stressed, he adds.

Big heart, big vision

The Christian tenets of compassion, humility and hope embedded in Mayor Henry through his upbringing come to light when

others speak of him.

Tim Haffner, a partner at Faegre Drinker Biddle & Reath LLP and an Indiana Chamber board member, has known Henry for decades and through the years serving as the city's attorney.

"He had a compassion for people that was unequalled, but he also really wanted to see the city grow. I would say he was fearless when it came to changing the city," Haffner asserts.

He explains that boldness would translate into a revamped downtown landscape during the course of Henry's tenure.

"He didn't know how to fail because it always seemed to work out," Haffner praises. "He had great instincts. I think those instincts led him to tackle projects that others didn't, either because they didn't think they could get it done or they didn't have the confidence to get it done."

Henry is now the city's longest serving Mayor, having been elected five times.

Haffner notes that Fort Wayne tends to be a more Republican city by voter registration, but Henry – a Democrat – was "just so darn likable" and wasn't much for politicizing.

"In the 17 years I worked closely with him, I never saw him hold a grudge or use politics to favor one or the other," Haffner relays. "It was always about what's best for the community and (asking), 'How do we get things done?' He recognized you've got to do business with everybody to be able to move the community forward."

"He just wanted to make a difference,



"Faces of the Fort" murals blended well with Henry's emphasis on being an inclusive community. They celebrate a diversity of influential figures who helped shape the city, like entrepreneur and musician William E. Warfield.

and he was practical and pragmatic; people trusted him across the aisle," he adds.

Deputy Mayor Karl Bandemer was a longtime partner and friend of Mayor Henry's and was even briefly sworn in following his death. He believes what Henry enjoyed most about his role was being amongst the people.

"He liked doing neighborhood walks," he shares. "I don't believe it had anything to do with his ego, but if he went out, wherever he was, people would come up and recognize him. It was more than just a 'Hi.' He would sit there and talk to them and he wanted to find out what they were interested in."

That Fort Wayne 'swagger'

Mayor Henry was the leader who helped his city "get its swagger back," according to Haffner, pointing to its reputation for manufacturing, engineering and more in the 1950s – 1970s.

"Some of that transitioned with mergers and relocations, and then some plant closures," he recalls. "We suffered some of the same challenges of loss of manufacturing a lot of communities our size did, and I think folks really at the outset of Mayor Henry's tenure were still doubting themselves on whether Fort Wayne had the wherewithal to rebound."



The recent Franke Park Renaissance exemplifies how Henry did not shy away from major projects that could transform parts of the community.

He now observes a renewed confidence, evidenced by the attraction of younger citizens to the area and reinvestment in the community.

Bandemer is grateful for all Henry accomplished and credits the previous Mayor Graham Richard for setting the stage. In fact, Richard was named the Indiana Chamber's Government Leader of the Year in 2007.

He points to the building of the baseball stadium in downtown Fort Wayne as a spark early in Henry's mayoral tenure.

"That was kind of the catalyst for a lot of private development apartments and office buildings to occur," Bandemer says. "And that brought people back to the downtown and created a lot of new energy for the community.

"The old adage in development is 'activity gets activity,' " he imparts. "And so I think we became kind of a can-do community here. Before that, I think that my experience had been that it was really tough to get something going, but people saw the success and started investing in the community."

Jerry Henry concurs, noting Tom had a knack for understanding how to build momentum.

"Tom learned early on that where public money goes, private money follows, and the old ways of being conservative and sitting on a big nest egg does a few people good, but it does a majority of people no good," he asserts. "You've got to put your money where your mouth is."

Mayor Henry's obituary lists some of the most notable accomplishments during his years running the city, which include the completion of Harrison Square, Ash Skyline Plaza, Dr. Martin Luther King Bridge, the trail system and Riverfront Development, which led to the creation of Promenade Park.

Furthermore, the gregarious Mayor built bridges in many ways, it seems.

When asked what he was likely most proud of, Bandemer points to what would ultimately become the Veterans Memorial Bridge.

"It's an homage to all the branches of the military, and it's a beautiful bridge," he says.

"But it's more than a bridge; it's a memorial and it really stands out. Of all the projects, that was a big one for him.

"It took him about three years, but he was always on it, (asking) 'How's the bridge coming?' That was the one thing that in some instances kind of tired us out because we always knew that was going to be the one thing he was always asking about."

Enduring impact

At her swearing-in ceremony on April 23 at the Clyde Theatre, new Mayor Sharon Tucker offered praises for her predecessor.

"Tom Henry has left our city in a great position," Mayor Tucker said. "We are



Friends say Henry was known for his gregarious nature and genuine curiosity about what was on the minds of his constituents.



fiscally sound. We have wonderful projects that are in motion, and great projects that have been completed. I will not pretend that I could ever fit his shoes. But I will absolutely take the path that he has laid out and make my own little footprints in the sand."

Jerry reciprocates, complimenting the way Mayor Tucker has respected his brother in the transition process.

"She's done a wonderful job of stepping in with courage and faith, and she's been very loyal to the family and respectful of how we might feel in any given situation," he appreciates. "So, she gets high marks from the family."

As Bandemer continues his career as

deputy mayor, he beams when talking about the history – and future – of the city, emboldened by Henry's impact.

"Fort Wayne's now the fastest growing city in the Great Lakes region, and we're one of the few cities in Indiana actually growing in population," he touts. "We have improved the result of quality of life here. There are more things to do, and there's just more of everything, so I think he will always be associated with that."

David Ober, a former state lawmaker who represented the Fort Wayne area's 82nd district, shares what Mayor Henry meant and the influence he had on the city and him personally.



Bridges became a theme of Henry's tenure on both personal and structural levels. (vorderman-photo.com photo)

"Fort Wayne wouldn't be the vibrant place it is today – well-positioned for business growth, with modern amenities and a strong sense of community – without Tom Henry's leadership," says Ober, who now serves as senior vice president of business operations and finance for the Indiana Chamber.

"As I started my political career, I looked to him as a model of public service, someone who knew how to work collaboratively to achieve the best outcomes for the people he served."

Bandemer also reflects on being with Mayor Henry the afternoon before he passed away. He had spoken at a builders' meeting and received a standing ovation. In fact, Bandemer had just arrived in Colorado the next day for a vacation when he received the call and immediately flew back. He shares the unexpectedly sudden nature of his passing led to an "outpouring of grief" in the community.

Jerry's grateful for that support shown by Fort Wayne's citizenry to the family following Tom's death.

"We had a giant procession and 4,000 people came through the viewing," he recalls. "It was really humbling to see how moved people were.

"They stood outside in the rain, outside of the courthouse, and he lied in state," Jerry concludes. "It was really beautiful. We sent him off like a shooting star."

As for the mayor's enduring contributions to the community, perhaps it's best summarized by his obituary: "As Mayor, Tom's accomplishments are too numerous to fully detail. He was proud of each project that moved Fort Wayne forward. His vision shaped the skyline, the waterways and the neighborhoods that make Fort Wayne a truly livable city."



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