

in tribute

By Douglas Root

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REMEMBERING WILLIAM HOLDSHIP REA

At the June memorial celebration service for Bill Rea at the Covenant Presbyterian Church in Ligonier, just a few miles from his beloved family farm, his son, Sam, told those jammed into every inch of pew about a strange remark his father had made at a recent family gathering.

“I can’t think of one thing I’ve done that is of any lasting importance,” the 94-year-old patriarch announced in the presence of some of his five adult children. Those in the room stared at one another in stunned silence before one of his four daughters decided to pass over reminding him of his star-studded resume and appeal instead to his familial instincts.

“But Dad, what about all of us — your children?”

The response took Bill by surprise; he apparently hadn’t considered his audience, and he thought for a few seconds. “Oh, no. Your mother did that.”

Laughter echoed throughout the church at the re-telling of Bill’s self-deprecating response — some of it also out of appreciation for Bill’s wife, Ingrid, a Carnegie Museums devotee who died in 2003. But there had been groaning and head shaking at first, as Bill’s son uttered the words to the effect of “no lasting importance.”

It seemed particularly ludicrous in the church setting that afternoon as luminaries from all over southwestern Pennsylvania, including Pittsburgh CEOs, politicians, foundation heads and civic leaders, came in such numbers that some had to stand in the vestibules.

Many in the church were thinking about how the front-page obituaries in the region’s newspapers were only able to touch on the highlights of a man who came from a prominent Pittsburgh family but managed to make his own prominence in service to others.

He was president of one of the region’s most successful commercial real estate companies, an architect-helper to Jack Heinz in creating the nationally celebrated Pittsburgh Cultural

District, an activist board member with more than a dozen organizations, including the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, the University of Pittsburgh, the Pittsburgh School Board and several offering minority training and employment programs. He and Ingrid were committed conservationists and were staunch supporters of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and Powdermill Nature Reserve, which borders his family’s Stoneylonesome Farm.

Those of us who knew Bill well from his service on both boards of the Endowments — a total of 30 years influencing how enormous sums of money were spent in the region — there is much in his personality to explain a self-assessment that seems so wildly off base.

We knew it well from twice-a-year board meetings, as Bill had a reputation for flipping past polished presentations and glossy written materials designed to sell grant proposals. Instead, he would pose one or two blunt questions that often challenged the premise of what was being offered.

With Bill, it was always about testing how well each and every grant was living up to the Endowments’ mission in the community. Reflecting his Presbyterian-conservative’s soul, Bill’s sense of philanthropy’s mission was far more grounded in practicalities. Instead of “Will this improve the quality of life for some of our less fortunate?” Bill was apt to bark out: “Exactly how many jobs will be created with this program?” Or, “How much money would it take to go at this full force instead of putting a Band-Aid on it?”

Sometimes, those questions were laced with a world-weary exasperation — but always in reaction to the problem, not to those working to solve the problem. Bill had an abiding respect for those who work or volunteer in the nonprofit world, and he often would go out of his way in a phone call or hallway conversation to make a staff person or grantee understand that he cared.



Clyde Hare

One of Bill Rea's lasting legacies is Pittsburgh's Cultural District, which he helped create as part of the "band of dreamers" gathered by the late Jack Heinz, president of the H. J. Heinz Company and chairman of the Howard Heinz Endowment. Here Bill stands in the right foreground at a meeting of the group in Jack Heinz's New York City apartment. Others include, from left, Sen. H. John Heinz; Drue Heinz, Jack Heinz's wife, seated next to the senator; and Jack Heinz, standing left center.

But Bill also had a reputation for challenging staff and board colleagues to go to the core of an issue and test basic assumptions. If they went there with him, grants usually emerged much stronger at the end of the discussion. If people stood their ground, he had the assurance of knowing the degree of their conviction.

Bill thrived on the intellectual give-and-take that came when community leaders key to the foundation's significant investments were invited to speak at board meetings and dinners. Even in his later years, when he had lost much of his sight, Bill was actively engaged in such discussions. He would often slap his knee in gleeful appreciation of a speaker's wit or a well-argued position, even if it ran against his political grain.

So it is no great surprise to those of us at the Endowments that as he knew he was reaching the end of his life, Bill turned that same unflinching intellectual analysis and provocative questioning onto himself to test for basic worthiness and meaningful contribution.

Looking past the diplomas from cream-of-the-crop schools, the framed awards, the business success and even his own family, Bill was searching for the essential impact. The standards he set for qualifying for a life of lasting importance were generously light for others and impossibly difficult for himself.

We at the Endowments can only hope that we played some role in easing some of Bill's fundamental questioning with a surprise grant presentation at the boards' May 9 meeting made just a week before his death. A special \$2 million grant for an endowment funding two new curator positions at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and Powdermill Nature Reserve was made in the names of Bill and Ingrid. True to form in accepting the award, Bill gave all the credit for museum and conservation work to his wife. *h*

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A TOWERING PRESENCE

To the question of whether the actions of Bill's life have affected others in important and lasting ways, he must have found some satisfaction in the words offered by fellow board member André Heinz, especially this excerpt reprinted here as a tribute from the entire Heinz family:

I would like to describe you, Bill, and say you are very much like a forest...

You are like the Apple Tree: because every season that we meet, you are fruitful;

You are like the Ponderosa Pine: After the fires and ravages of change, you still stand tall, and drop your seeds of wisdom;

You are like the Elm: After a hard day's work, you offer shade, reflection and your majesty;

You are like the Maple: tough on the outside and sweet inside;

You are like the Oak: a stalwart friend from whom you learn to climb ever higher. And when after the squirrels have long forgotten where they buried their acorns of experience, you still remember;

You are like the American Chestnut: You have kept the pioneers in this field nourished; you have offered all of yourself; you have proved to be the most useful and enduring resource around; and you are almost a lost breed, the kind upon which America's greatness has been built;

And, as with most forests of 94 years, you taught us what it truly means to be young.