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A lifetime of service remembered Community leader Robert Griffith dies at age 76

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Griffith

Some people just know how to get things done. During a tenure in town that spanned 55 years, Robert Griffith served as a junior high and high school principal, football coach, city councilmember, mayor, businessman and volunteer firefighter. In between, he also found time to help establish a hospital and public library.

Variously lauded with awards as a Round Rock "Outstanding Citizen," "Local Legend" and "Mover and Shaker," Griffith died Sunday after a lengthy series of illnesses that had, in recent years, robbed him of the health and vitality for which he was famous. He was 76.

Griffith's funeral service is scheduled for 10 a.m. Friday at Palm Valley Lutheran Church, where he was a parishioner for 53 years.

"He touched education, government and business," retired library director Dale Ricklefs said. "I don't know many people in this community who have touched all three."

The son of an Army lieutenant colonel and the grandson of sharecroppers, Griffith grew up in the Wood High community, near Victoria.

Griffith and his then-new bride, Helen, arrived in Round Rock in 1957 when he accepted a job as a student teacher. Round Rock High School - the only high school in the district - was where C.D. Fulkes Middle School is today and the town was home to only about 1,200 people.

From 1957 to 1973 Griffith worked as an RRISD teacher, junior high and high school principal, and assistant varsity football coach for the Class 1A Dragons.

Like another community icon, Bunky Whitlow (who died in 2006), Griffith strengthened and expanded his community ties when he went to work for Farmer's State Bank. Through a series of mergers and consolidations Griffith stayed in the banking business from 1978 until his 2005 retirement.

"He helped get the first medical institution out here," Wag-A-Bag convenience store cofounder Nancy Rabb said. "We were just a small town and we struggled in every aspect. And everything we needed came in with quality and gusto and caring."

During a 2005 interview with the Leader, Griffith recalled how his son and namesake, years before, had broken his ankle during a Little League baseball game.

"I remember gathering him up in my arms and driving to Brookside Hospital," Griffith said. "We had no hospital."

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The situation did not sit well with Griffith and other community leaders. They worked toward recruiting Dr. Robert Peters (who died in January) to town in 1972 and later getting Round Rock Hospital built.

Griffith served on the Round Rock City Council from 1975-80, including two years as mayor pro-tem and another two years as mayor.

Helen, meanwhile, was logging time at the public library, where she would work for 32 years until her retirement in 2006.

The library officially became a city department in 1977-78, during Robert Griffith's tenure as mayor pro-tem, Ricklefs recalled.

Retired children's librarian Barbara Vance remembered it as a case of necessity being the mother of invention.

"His wife was working in what were some temporary buildings and then they had to move the library to their house," she said. "So they had to do something - the library was in his house."

In 1999, after a renovation and expansion project, the Main Street facility was rededicated as the Robert G. and Helen Griffith Library.

"Bob Griffith was so instrumental in forming every single aspect of what we now enjoy in this Round Rock community," Rabb said. "I worked with him on city issues, school issues, sports issues, service clubs ... He worked on the original Frontier Days ... He was so instrumental in what we have today. He was the daddy of it all."

Vance and Chip Hadley recalled recruiting Griffith in 1998 for a part in the library's annual fundraiser, the Mystery Night amateur play.

"We were trying to make it a community thing and nobody was a bigger part of the community than Bob," Hadley said. "He wasn't keen on memorizing a lot of lines, but Bob had presence. Presence will carry you a long way on stage."

So, apparently, will determination.

Vance said Griffith suffered a heart attack during one performance, but kept it from her until after the show was over.

"He had to finish that commitment," Vance said. "That's the kind of man Bob Griffith was."

During the 2005 Leader interview, Griffith looked back on what was then more than 50 years of living, working and raising a family in Round Rock.

"I've been blessed," he said. "The bottom line is Round Rock has been very good to me. I hope I've given something back to it."

In that regard, Griffith's friends and colleagues say "the daddy of it all" can rest easy.

"He's one that left a legacy that will be remembered forever," Mayor Alan McGraw said.

"He didn't just sit on a board. He got his hands dirty," Ricklefs said. "He was not a townie. He didn't grow up in this town. This community allows you to go out there and get involved. He was symbolic of this community."