

Philanthropist Developer Bill Carstens Dies in Arizona

Telluride Watch Newspaper
Apr 28, 2006

Longtime San Miguel County developer and philanthropist Bill Carstens, 75, died early Sunday, April 23, at the University Medical Center in Tucson, Ariz., where he was being treated for leukemia, diagnosed eight months earlier.

Carstens bought his first ranch near Telluride in the mid-1980s, and soon became one of the largest property owners in the county. He went on to successfully promote the mesa lifestyle that has become one of the region's hallmarks. At the same time, he and his wife, Deborah, were generous donors to local nonprofits and causes.

Carstens was born in Denver on March 12, 1931. "His dad was an accountant," says his daughter, Cheryl Miller, a longtime resident of the Telluride region. "He worked for Anaconda Copper."

It was when the family moved to California, during his school years, that Carstens discovered the YMCA.

"It was such an awakening experience for him," says his daughter; and indeed, as Carstens grew to be one of San Diego's most successful commercial real-estate developers, that city's YMCA was the first beneficiary of a philanthropic career that was truly remarkable.

Carstens graduated from Occidental College, with plans to attend University of Southern California law school. But school officials tried to change his mind, Miller recalls. "Your aptitude tests say you really should be an engineer," they told him. "You didn't score high enough on your verbal exams to be a lawyer."

"That's what legal secretaries are for," Carstens retorted, and went to law school, as planned, graduating top in his class.

Being galvanized by naysayers was a pattern that showed up often in Carstens's life. "Every ten years or so," Millers says, "he would take on something new."

After serving as a legal officer with the U.S. Marines in Japan, Carstens came home to a job with a San Diego law firm, going on to work as district attorney in the San Diego suburb of National City. As an attorney, Carstens specialized in real estate contract law, but soon decided "the real estate developers were, from his perspective, having all the fun," says Miller. He soon was buying and selling fixer-upper beach houses – "We'd spend whole summers in beach houses while he fixed them up," Miller recalls, "before he resold them."

Carstens next moved into commercial real estate development in San Diego when, finding an undeveloped piece of land near the Miramar Naval Air Station, "he started thinking about mini-warehouses" – known today as self-storage – for housing sailors' possessions during their months-long tours at sea. The business took off like a rocket. "What he didn't realize at the time," Miller explains, "was that everybody, not just sailors, wanted to clear out their closets, but not necessarily get rid of

stuff."

Carstens, an avid pilot, discovered San Miguel County in the mid-1980s. "I'm going to check out that new airport in Telluride," he told his daughter. In a matter of weeks, he called to say, "You won't believe what I did.

"I bought a ranch in Telluride." Over a sack lunch, after snowshoeing into Snyder Ranch with a real estate broker, Carstens told friends later, "I just couldn't get over the feeling that Julie Andrews was just about to come over the ridge with all the von Trapps in full song."

"That feeling never went away," Miller says; at the time of his death, Carstens's Sound of Music Ranch property was his last holding in the county.

Naysayers prophesied doom for Carstens's vision of mesa development, borne out of that first visit to Sound of Music Ranch. Once again, the negativity was galvanizing. On a visit to Iron Springs Mesa, "He saw where there was access to roads, water and power," his daughter says. And once Carstens carved out 35-acre ranches, first on the Bluffs, then the Lakes at Carstens Ranch, with \$50,000-\$60,000 price tags. "They sold really fast," Miller recalls. "People were thrilled."

Carstens then went on to "enhance," in his own careful terminology, other mesas in the region, including Specie, Beaver, Iron Springs, Horsefly and Wilson mesas, pioneering conservation easements, riparian area protection and beneficial land trades with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

But soon the largest landholder in San Miguel County turned his sights elsewhere, going on to become one of its most philanthropic residents. His deceptively simple 3 Percent Solution, calling for first-time buyers of mesa property to earmark 1 percent of the purchase price to their favorite regional charity (to which then he contributed another 2 percent to organizations of his choice); that plan alone generated more than \$1 million in charitable contributions regionally.

As he divested himself of Telluride region real estate, Carstens turned more of his energies to philanthropy. Bill and Debbie Carstens created the San Miguel Kids Endowment to fund organizations benefiting the children of Telluride, Norwood and San Miguel County's West End school districts.

Then, in 2001, Carstens established the Just for Kids Fund Foundation, to help children throughout the San Miguel Watershed.

"Bill had started to spend more of his time in Arizona," says JFK co-founder Erik Fallenius, "and asked me to help organize a board to create what then became JFK."

Fallenius and his wife, Josephine organized the JFK Mountains to Desert bike ride in response to Carstens's \$50,000 "challenge grant." The ride raises \$50,000, that is then matched by the Carstens Family Fund and the Denver Foundation.

"Bill was a super-astute and very, very tough businessman and negotiator," Fallenius says, "and established a lot of the development that ultimately occurred on the mesas" in the Telluride region.

"My relationship with him was really just in philanthropy," he adds.

"He was so creative," says Miller. "For example, when he put the Sound of Music parcels up for sale, he parceled off 1700-plus acres for percentage ownership" by a roster of foundations including the Telluride Foundation, the San Diego YMCA, the Denver Foundation, the San Diego Community Foundation and the Phoenix Foundation – and more.

Carstens also funded an annual college scholarship program, was a founding benefactor of the One to One mentorship program, as well as of the Horizons program and Telluride Education Foundation, both aimed at enhancing the educations of children in the Telluride region, and supported the American Field Services student year-abroad program. Carstens became a major contributor to the Telluride Foundation, and served on its board of directors; he supported the Telluride Jazz Celebration, as well as the Telluride Mountainfilm Festival.

After attending the Telluride Institute Ideas Festival on Affordable Housing, and fully comprehending the Telluride region's exponentially mounting need for employee housing, Carstens jumped in, working with a group of fellow business professionals to identify Lawson Hill for development, citing his deeply held belief that "if you give this job to the business community, they'll get it done."

"I had the pleasure of knowing Bill for 25 years," says Ron Allred, former owner of the Telluride Ski and Golf Company and a founding member of the Telluride Foundation. "He did everything in his power to help the Telluride community and the children in the region. He set a wonderful example for all of us, through his generosity and leadership in philanthropy. He will be deeply missed but his legacy will live on through all the kids he has helped over the years."

In recent years, Bill and Debbie Carstens transferred the base of their operations to Arizona, where, Miller says, her father next singled out the relatively impoverished Murphy School District, in the larger Phoenix region, announcing to his wife, one morning at breakfast, that he was heading over there.

I don't think you can do that as a private citizen," Debbie responded.

"Why not?" Carstens responded. Soon he was implementing curriculum improvements inspired by former U.S. Congressman, Senator and Secretary of Labor Bill Brock, from Brock's pioneering learning-assessment Bridges Program. The Murphy District superintendent became a close friend. Upon seeing a "really cool climbing wall" on a visit to a wealthy Phoenix-area school district, Carstens announced: "I need one of these things for my kids."

Now, "his kids" district celebrates Carstens's March 12 birthday as Bill Carstens Day.

Carstens recently orchestrated a name-change of his Telluride-based College Scholarship Fund to Man of La Mancha Fund, a move begun by Miller while incorporating students from the west end of the county into the programs' beneficiaries. "I just really like the story," Carstens told Debbie. "It seems that all my life, when I've wanted to do something, someone has always told me it wasn't possible.

"I guess I was lucky enough to always pull through, and make it happen."

"Even though he was no Don Quixote," Miller says, "he had a real affinity for that story."

Carstens is survived by his wife, Debbie; by daughters Cheryl Miller, Debra Westphal and Connie Arnson and stepdaughter Lindsay Killick; and by grandchildren Fern, Sarah and David Miller, Erick

Westphal and Kristi Arnson.

In keeping with Bill Carstens's large heart and philanthropic pioneering, the family requests that in lieu of flowers, contributions be made to the charities of the donor's choice. The reasoning, of course, is to "encourage people to get involved in philanthropy," Miller says, "get involved with their communities, and maybe to make a donation they might not have made otherwise."

A memorial service is planned for June 10 for family and friends at the Sound of Music Ranch.

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