

Stringfellow remembered for energy, community focus

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Patriarch of one of Gainesville's oldest families dies after lifetime of service

Jim Stringfellow was a man of wealth, but money never motivated him.

Born to one of Gainesville's pioneer families, he made a career in the family building supply business.

But while Stringfellow Supply Company fared well, he was much more than a businessman focused on turning profits and expanding his empire.

For instance: He built an airplane, because he wanted to. He ran marathons, including the famed races in Boston and New York. He was a violinist. An athlete. He pushed for a longer, better runway at Gainesville Regional Airport. When he and his wife Jennie Stringfellow built their home near Paynes Prairie 18 years ago, he did much of its woodwork himself.

It took 3½ years to build the home, and he handled all manner of details, from all of its doors, to cutting and hand-hammering copper shingles for its unique copela, son Jim Stringfellow Jr. said Wednesday.

When Stringfellow and his wife bought a vacation place in North Carolina in the 1980s, they restored floors and hung mind-boggling rolls of wallpaper. He took up gardening.

"He didn't have a sedentary bone in his body," his son said.

Stringfellow died Monday at Haven Hospice, at age 85. He'd had a non-aggressive form of leukemia for many years and, more recently, congestive heart failure.

He was a fourth-generation descendant of one of Gainesville's oldest families. His great-grandfather, William Hall Stringfellow, was one of the town's first doctors and the first speaker at an 1852 meeting at which residents chose Gainesville as the county seat.

The family made its way first with a grain-grinding (mostly corn) operation called Sweetwater Mills. It later became Stringfellow Wholesale Grocery, distributing grain and sugar to independent grocers. When local grocers turned into chain groceries, the store became a hardware supplier (literally nuts and bolts and the like), supplying independent hardware stores over a multi-county area.

To adapt, Stringfellow expanded into larger building materials, like roofing supplies and lumber. With the advent of hardware chains, Stringfellow became more of a local distributor.

In what was one of the city's most memorable fires, the operation burned in the mid-1980s, and Stringfellow stepped back and his grown children then took on responsibility for rebuilding and running the business.

While Stringfellow enjoyed work, he was more interested in customers and employees than becoming a corporate titan, his son said.

"I think sometimes a lot of folks think that people who excel in business are all about personal gain. And he excelled in business, but he was all about other people," Stringfellow Jr. said. "He was never about personal gain. He never had any love for material things. He was about the human condition and about those who had less and those who were in need."

Among his many interests, Stringfellow most frequently found himself involved in health-related issues. He chaired the advisory board for the CHOICES program created by the county in the mid-2000s, a voter-approved, quarter-cent sales tax meant to help the county's poorest residents get health care without clogging hospital emergency rooms — a precursor to today's health care debates.

He helped get FluMist to schoolchildren. He chaired the board of the Partnership for Strong Families and lobbied Tallahassee for better child welfare funding.

Jody Davis, a CPA-turned-divorce mediator who became a friend to Stringfellow years ago when they frequently served on civic committees and boards together, said he always felt confident if Stringfellow was behind a cause.

“You could just feel good, if he was involved in something, you’d know it was for the right reason. Not for his ego, it’s to help,” he said.

Besides his wife and son, Stringfellow is survived by sons Richard Stringfellow and Doug Stringfellow, daughter Martha Murphree Stringfellow York, and seven grandchildren.

A funeral service is set for 10 a.m. Saturday at Holy Trinity Episcopal Church, 100 NE 1st St. in downtown Gainesville. The family asks that instead of flowers, memorial donations be made to Partnership for Strong Families or Haven Hospice.