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'The Colonel' Robert Spiller dies, leaves legacy of philanthropy

By DON SERGENT dsargent@bgdailynews.com Jan 15, 2018

Col. Robert Spiller (left) talks with William Skaggs of the Southern Kentucky Performing Arts Center during the Community Foundation of Southern Kentucky's 2017 South Central Kentuckian of the Year event in May at the Knicely Conference Center.

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He was simply “The Colonel” to those who knew him. To those who didn’t, chances are he was a benefactor, an unseen helping hand.

Robert Spiller, a 30-year Army veteran who was known by his military rank and for his wide-ranging philanthropic efforts in southcentral Kentucky, died Saturday. He was 89.

The Oakland resident and his wife of 66 years, Cora Jane Spiller, fashioned a career out of helping local nonprofits and individuals. Col. Spiller served on numerous boards and was a prominent benefactor of the Boys and Girls Club, The Salvation Army, South Union Shaker Village and Kids on the Block.

He was also a leader of the effort to locate a nursing home for military veterans in this region.

Those who knew him recalled him as a selfless man who simply wanted to help others and the community.

“When I was chairman of the Capitol Arts Center, they (the Spillers) were always there with their support, with both funds and their passion for the arts,” Bowling Green’s Barry Williams said. “At Kids on the Block it was much the same. It seemed like they always knew when we were running tight on funds, and they would stop by with a check.”

Williams said Col. Spiller resisted efforts to recognize him for such gestures, but he and his wife still received a number of awards in recent years.

Both were winners of Jefferson Awards for community service, and the Spillers were honored as 2017 South Central Kentuckians of the Year by the Community Foundation of South Central Kentucky.

A past grand marshal of the Bowling Green Veterans Day Parade, Col. Spiller earned the 2017 Community Service Award from the Cumberland Trace chapter of the Military Officers Association.

Col. Spiller is survived by his wife and four children: Jane James of New Providence, N.J.; Bob Spiller and his wife, Pam Dukes, of New Albany, Ind.; Nancy Lozinski and her husband, Jerry, of Parkland, Fla.; and Helen Petersen and her husband, Paul, of Cape Town, South Africa.



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Col. Spiller set a great example for his children and others, daughter Peterson said.

“My father was truly an incredible, thoughtful, kind, genuine, generous man, a dynamic duo with my mother,” she said in an email. “As an English teacher, when I look up the word philanthropist, I expect to see The Colonel and Cora Jane’s pictures because for 66 years they worked side by side to help those in need and make the world a better place. The Colonel led his life by giving and doing for others, a true American hero, an example for us all.

“He has touched so many people in countless ways, from teaching them how to cane a chair to ringing the bell for The Salvation Army to sending children through Western (Kentucky University). He left his mark, a mark that will never be erased. We will miss The Colonel terribly, but his legacy will live on in those who were touched by him.”

Funeral arrangements, being handled by J.C. Kirby Lovers Lane Chapel, were incomplete as of press time Monday.

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