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Joseph Alton, first Anne Arundel executive, dies

'In his mind, there was no can't' -- Molly Alton Mullins, Alton's granddaughter

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File photo by J. Henson, Staff

Joseph Alton

Former Republican County Executive Joseph W. Alton Jr. of Annapolis stands by his official portrait in 2000.

Lighthizer recalled.

"It was his charisma," said Lighthizer, county executive from 1982 through 1990. "I often said he could charm the birds right out of the trees."

Reluctant politician

Alton got his first taste of local politics through his father, Joseph W. Alton Sr., who was county sheriff. Alton worked for his dad as deputy, then ran for his seat when he passed away in 1950.

Supporters talked him into running, Lighthizer said.

Posted: Saturday, March 30, 2013 12:00 am

By ALLISON BOURG abourg@capgaznews.com | 4 comments

Joseph W. Alton Jr. wanted to be a builder, not a politician.

So it's fitting that Anne Arundel's first executive, who died Friday morning, was the architect of charter government in the county, friends and family said.

"Joe was a force in local politics," said former county executive O. James Lighthizer, a close friend of Alton's. "It is difficult to understand how dominant he was. There's been no one like that, before or since."

Family members said the 94-year-old Eastport native, who went to prison in 1974 for pocketing cash on county contracts, passed away after several years of deteriorating health.

His passing comes two days after the death of his son, Joseph W. Alton III. The 64-year-old, a longtime personnel analyst for Anne Arundel County, died of a heart attack.

"Little Joe and Big Joe, they were father and son all the way," said John Hammond, acting chief administrative officer for Anne Arundel County. "It's just one of those things in life, you run into these coincidences."

Despite being naturally shy and soft-spoken, the Republican became so popular among his constituents that more than 1,000 people attended a going-away party for him before he went to prison,

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"He was a very shy guy who got pulled into politics," Lighthizer said. "He just happened to be extremely good at it."

As a Republican state senator, Alton wrote the law that created charter government in the county in the 1960s. The charter dissolved what was widely regarded as an outdated form of government that set up a board of commissioners elected from around the county.

"Before charter government, Anne Arundel County was known as the banana republic," Lighthizer said. "Anything went."

As county executive, Alton hired young executives to run county departments instead of political insiders. There was a time during the 1960s that he controlled both the Republican and Democratic committees in the county, Lighthizer said.

"He was an extremely persuasive man," he said. "He had the special ability to make you want to please him, and he did it in a very low-key way."

But his time in public office ended on a sour note.

In November 1974, Alton was charged in federal court with conspiracy to obstruct interstate commerce for trying to get \$36,000 in kickbacks from companies seeking contracts with the county government, *The Evening Capital* reported at the time.

After he pleaded guilty the following month, Alton released a statement that said in part, "All of the money I ever received went into either my campaigns or for the dozens of other candidates I helped finance. The fact that I was careful not to allow my political activities to adversely affect the operation of government can not alter the fact that some of these activities were excessive and in violation of the law."

"He looked after his friends," said his nephew, Gary Alton. "He never took a dime of public money."

Even as he ended his political career under a cloud, Alton remained popular.

On his last day in office, when the next county executive, Robert A. Pascal, was sworn in, Alton was besieged by well-wishers and given a standing ovation after an impromptu speech.

"He got along with everybody," Pascal recalled Friday. "He knew what to say and when to say it."

Alton served his time and wasn't sheepish about it, Pascal said.

"He took it like a man," Pascal said.

Kurt Alton Klima, Alton's godson and namesake, said it's unfortunate that Alton will likely be remembered for his time behind bars.

"Besides that, I think he'll be remembered as a people person," said Klima, whose father was a county commissioner when Alton was sheriff.

The former county executive remained an influential force in county politics after his release from prison. Alton was sentenced to 18 months in jail.

He was credited with helping Republican Robert R. Neall win the 1990 election for county executive. At the time, local political observers claimed a letter he sent to registered Democrats who voted for him 20 years earlier made the difference in the close race between Neall and now-Del. Ted Sophocleus.

Hammond, a former Annapolis city councilman who ran for county executive in 1982 and lost, said Alton's connections were invaluable to aspiring politicians.

"You always wanted to talk to Joe to get his blessing," Hammond said.

He remembered reaching out to him for advice. Alton reminded him there's no such thing as a Republican road or a Democratic sewer.

Alton's family members said he didn't take no for an answer.

'Larger than life'

Molly Alton Mullins, his granddaughter, remembered the time Alton promised to take her hiking in Harpers Ferry, W.Va., when she was 12.

But several days before they were supposed to go, he sprained his ankle. Undeterred, Alton hiked to the top of the mountain on crutches.

"He never wanted me to think that when you make a promise, you can go back on it," Mullins said. "In his mind, there was no 'can't.'"

When Alton's health began to fail several years ago, he was confined to a wheelchair. An avid jogger into his 80s, he still asked her when he would be able to walk again, Mullins said.

He thought he'd "just go on to the next great moment in life," she said.



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Alton's grandson, Bryan Levy, described Alton as "larger than life."

"He was always a politician, so everywhere you went, people would want to talk to him," Levy said. "The biggest mistake you ever made was telling him something couldn't be done. He liked to build things ... I think that's why he liked being the first county executive."

In accordance with Alton's wishes, there will be no public funeral. Contributions can be made to the Bowen Foundation for Autism, care of Molly Alton Mullins, 801 Parkwood Ave., Annapolis, MD 21403.

A private family service will be held for Joseph W. Alton III as well. In lieu of flowers, donations can be made to the Chesapeake Bay Trust, 60 West St., Suite 405, Annapolis, MD 21401.

Staff Writer Pamela Wood contributed to this story.

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