

# Former state Sen. Michael Wagner dies

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Michael J. Wagner Sr., a civic activist who mentored a generation of elected officials in Anne Arundel County, died Thursday morning after a brief struggle with cancer. He was 72.

Born in Baltimore on Oct. 20, 1941, Wagner lived in Ferndale nearly all his life. He was the driving force behind the annual Ferndale Day parade and created the Take Back Our Streets campaign to help less-fortunate families during the holidays.

Jim McHugh became close friends with Wagner in the 1990s. He said his friend loved his community so much residents called him “Mr. Ferndale.”

“He’s always been a down-to-earth, common-sense guy that treated everybody in a very generous way,” McHugh said. “He helped a lot of people and never asked for any credit for it.”

In 2011, Wagner was recognized at the Anne Arundel County Sports Hall of Fame banquet, not only for his longtime support of youth athletics but also for helping create the Hall of Fame itself.

“Mike cared an awful lot about his community,” said state Sen. Ed DeGrange, D-Glen Burnie, now head of Take Back Our Streets. “He was a very giving person.”

A conservative Democrat, Wagner was elected to the House of Delegates from District 32 in 1974, and three years later was appointed to the state Senate when Sen. Al Lipin took a job with the state. Wagner lost the seat in the next election to H. Erle Schafer, and then won it back in 1982.

During the late 1980s, Wagner was a chief proponent of the light rail system. He was accused of having a conflict of interest because the proposed route in Anne Arundel County was on an old railroad right of way owned by his former campaign manager, Kenneth Pippin.

Wagner denied it, and a state prosecutor completed an investigation into the matter without filing charges.

Light rail is “quiet, clean and quick. It’s been successful in other states,” Wagner said at the time. “I would push that whether (Pippin) owned it or not.”

In 1994, Wagner lost his Senate seat to County Councilman Ed Middlebrooks. Middlebrooks switched parties and gave up his council seat to challenge Wagner, accusing him of backroom dealing.

Wagner remained active in politics by advising a number of county Democrats, among them DeGrange, Del. Ted Sophocleus of Linthicum and County Councilman Daryl Jones of Severn. He groomed DeGrange, then a county councilman, to take back his old seat in 1998.

Wagner’s wife Carol said her husband loved serving in the General Assembly, but tired of politics and wanted only to coach other politicians and raise money for them.

“He was happy to serve but glad to finish it,” she said.

Among those who considered him an important adviser was former County Executive John Leopold, who said he turned to Wagner for counsel on subjects as diverse as raising development impact fees and community gardens. Wagner was a legendary backyard gardener.

“It’s really something that he loved, he and Carol as well. He should be remembered for that,” Leopold said.

Wagner made an attempt to return to public life in 2012, applying to fill a vacancy on the County Council left by the conviction of Jones for failing to file taxes. The council was deadlocked between Wagner and Pete Smith of Severn for weeks, but eventually appointed Smith.

Jones returned to the position after an appeals court ruled the council had improperly removed him.

Wagner was clear in talking about the job that he viewed the job as a way to serve the community.

“People in District 1 know me ... I’m part of everything my community does,” Wagner said. “I know how to get along with people. I know how to form coalitions and get things done.”

A Glen Burnie High School graduate, Wagner studied pre-law at the University of Baltimore and attended law school. But business became his passion.

When his father died in 1962, Wagner, his brothers and a sister took over the family business, H&M Wagner and Sons in Glen Burnie.

“They decided they would earn enough to pay the bills and then get serious jobs,” his wife said. “Well that never happened, because it grew and grew.”

Today, the bar and restaurant supply operation is just known as Wagner and Sons.

Wagner also was the president of Executive Caterers. He built on that business when he opened the popular Michael’s Eighth Avenue catering hall in Glen Burnie in 1990.

Although a Democrat, he counted many Republicans, including County Executive Robert Neall and former U.S. Rep. Marjorie Holt, among his customers.

The hall has been the site of thousands of events over the years, from weddings to boxing matches, from political fundraisers to teacher award ceremonies.

“Many young people had their first job at Michael’s Eighth Avenue, which was another passion of Mike’s, helping young people starting on their way,” DeGrange said.

Wagner learned he had cancer in December, his wife said. She said his reaction was calm: “Well, 72 ain’t a bad run.”

In addition to his wife, Wagner is survived by his sons, Mike and Scott, and five grandchildren.

“My husband believed in a good work ethic,” Carol said. “His hours weren’t 9 to 5, he did what he

had to do in a day and did what he could to satisfy everybody.”