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FEATURED

An icon passes: Fowler dies at 97

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This article has been updated.

He truly has left big sneakers to fill. On Sunday, Bernie Fowler's family announced that the former local and state political figure, who wielded perseverance and used a homespun methodology in bringing attention to the health of the Patuxent River, had died peacefully. He was 97.

"We knew it was coming," Fred Tutman, the Patuxent Riverkeeper, who was a good friend of Fowler and his family, told Southern Maryland News.

Tutman noted a documentary is in the works on the river, which narrowly winds its way through several counties before widening between Prince George's and Calvert counties. There was hope that Fowler would be able to participate in the project, but Tutman explained his family said he had grown weaker over the last few months.

Tutman lamented that Fowler's death means "all the institutional knowledge" has gone with him.

"I miss my friend Bernie," said Tutman.

Other environmentalists are mourning the Calvert County icon's passing as well.

"Senator Fowler was a great CBF partner," William C. Baker, Chesapeake Bay Foundation president stated on Monday. "He was a co-plaintiff in our 2009 lawsuit to compel the Environmental Protection Agency to enforce the Clean Water Act, which led to the current Clean Water Blueprint for the bay. And beyond his leadership for clean water and a restored bay, his tenacity to restore his beloved Patuxent River will be sorely missed."

Clyde Bernard Fowler was born March 30, 1924, in Baltimore. He grew up in Broomes Island and served in the Navy during World War II.

Fowler saw action during the war and in fact was initially believed to have been killed in action.

"He was misidentified," said George W. Owings III, a former state delegate and current state veterans affairs secretary, who noted a World War II monument on the Calvert County Courthouse Green had Fowler's name etched on it. His name was later covered by a metal rectangle.

Fowler, who was involved in several business ventures in Calvert County during his life, embarked on a successful political career, serving 12 years as a county commissioner and a dozen more as a state senator, representing Calvert and St. Mary's counties, and for a time a portion of southern Anne Arundel.



Prior to elective politics, Fowler also served on the county school board. After announcing his intention not to seek a fourth term as state senator, Fowler agreed to run for lieutenant governor along with 1994 Democratic gubernatorial candidate American Joe Miedusiewski. The team lost in the Democratic primary to Parris Glendening and Kathleen Kennedy Townsend.

Owings remembered Fowler as a passionate patriot and a highly principled politician.

“He was on the Charlotte Hall Veterans Commission for eons,” said Owings.

While he often looked the part of the rugged waterman that he was, Fowler cleaned up very nicely for Calvert’s many patriotic events, donning a white jacket replete with medals. The spry elder statesman marched in many parades, representing American Legion Post 85.

In the political arena, Owings said Fowler “was what you wanted a politician to be. He never wavered on any issue.”

During the late 1980s, when Owings, Fowler and other members of the Calvert delegation to Annapolis were trying to get the Route 260 flyover at the Route 4 intersection built, then-Gov. William Donald Schaefer withdrew funding for the project due to the local lawmakers refusal to support a gas tax increase.



Owings said Fowler declined to support the tax increase “because it went to mass transit projects” in other parts of the state. Fowler felt strongly that the citizens in his district were paying taxes to the state and getting nothing in return.

“He would not do something against his constituents,” Owings said. “He just said ‘no.’ I’ll remember him as an honest man who never wavered from his beliefs.”

In 1988, while still a state senator, Fowler began using his unofficial “sneaker index” to gauge the Patuxent River’s water clarity. The annual events, called “wade-ins,” were initially held at the river’s edge in Broomes Island and were later moved to Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum for the purpose of institutionalizing the exercise.

Fowler always wore a straw hat festooned with an American flag, blue overalls and a pair of white sneakers. Arm-in-arm, waders strolled in the river until Fowler could no longer see his sneakers.

He recalled during the 2018 event that when the first wade-in was held, his sneakers disappeared at around 10 inches. The worst-ever sneaker index was recorded the following year, a dismal 8 inches. This past June, the index was a modest 34 inches.

While growing up in Broomes Island and later returning to run Bernie's Boats, Fowler recalled being able to see his feet on the river's bottom for a great distance and catch crabs.

"I could go out in that water with my dip net and live box, and I could wade out until I couldn't wade any further, and I could still see the crabs on the bottom," Fowler told Southern Maryland News at the 2020 wade-in.

"What a wonderful event this is," Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md. 5th) declared during the 2018 wade-in. "What a wonderful, faithful steward Bernie Fowler is of this river, but more than this river, of the land and the water and of the air. What a legacy he has given to all of us."

On Monday, Hoyer wrote, "Bernie Fowler exemplified public service at its best and lived a life of extraordinary contribution. His unfailing dedication to the people of Calvert County and to the health and sustainability of the Patuxent River and Chesapeake Bay were legendary. The Patuxent and Chesapeake are cleaner and clearer because he had the courage to stand up to polluters and organized Marylanders to take action for conservation. Bernie was a man I greatly admired, a mentor to me and so many others, and I was proud to call a dear, dear friend for decades."

Calvert County Commissioner Steven R. Weems (R) called Fowler “a model citizen” during the board’s meeting Tuesday. Noting that in addition to Fowler, another World War II veteran, retired U.S. Sen. Robert Dole, also passed away recently, Weems stated, “There’s a window that’s closing on the greatest generation.”

“He was just an icon,” Commissioner Mike Hart (R) added.

Fowler’s survivors include four children and eight grandchildren. Betty, his wife of 69 years, died in 2018.

A celebration that had been planned at Calvert High School auditorium in Prince Frederick has been postponed to later in the spring due to increased number of COVID-19 cases. A private interment with the family will be held. Fowler’s final request, according to his obituary, was that in lieu of flowers, donations be made to Farming 4 Hunger or Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

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