

Lee Casper; home builder backed affordable housing

By Bonnie L. Cook
 STAFF WRITER

Lee A. Casper, 90, of Gladwyne, a home builder who leveraged his business skills to bring opportunity and affordable housing to declining neighborhoods in Philadelphia and Baltimore, died Sunday, July 24, of heart failure at Lankenau Hospital.

Born in Philadelphia and reared in Newark, N.J., Mr. Casper graduated from Newark's Central High School. He served in the Navy aboard a submarine in the South Pacific during World War II.

After the war, he was a potato and tomato farmer in Clarksburg, N.J. In 1958, he became an owner-partner in John Lecroy & Son, a spice manufacturing company in Camden.

In 1975, he hit his stride as a builder with the Philadelphia-based Howard Builders, where he stayed until retiring in 1993. His activities, though, were not limited to the private sector.

Starting in 1990, Mr. Casper volunteered as a project manager for the nonprofit Reinvestment Fund, a loan agency that unites investors, banks, government entities, foundations, and community groups in efforts to transform rundown communities.

In tandem with the city and Philadelphia Interfaith Action Foundation, the fund oversaw a sweeping effort to build affordable houses in West and North Philadelphia. The project was intended to make home ownership a reality for those earning \$18,000 to \$32,000. In August 1994, ground was broken on the first townhouses. Mr. Casper was assistant manager for a similar project in Baltimore.

"Lee brought invaluable home builder's and marketing expertise into a public purpose," said former fund director Jeremy Nowak.

Mr. Casper received the Reinvestment Fund's 2010 Lifetime Achievement Award for his 20 years of volunteer work. The award was presented by then-Gov. Ed Rendell.

Mr. Casper also served on the board of JEVS Human Services, a Jewish employment and vocational nonprofit. In 1997, he became the group's secretary, monitoring the fund-raising for, and completion of, Orleans Technical College in Philadelphia. The school opened in 2007.

"Without Lee's expertise in building and dealing with contractors, his ethics and values, the project never would have come in on budget," said CEO Jay Spector. "His dedication stemmed from a deep conviction that the at-risk, young and old, deserve opportunities and the means to take advantage of them."

Mr. Casper served on the site/facilities committee of Hope Partnership for Education, a nonprofit that converted a former Salvation Army building into a middle school and adult education center in North Philadelphia after a long search for suitable quarters.

Sister Rose Martin, the group's executive director, said Mr. Casper's devotion to the project grew from his belief that

education was a way out of poverty.

"Lee was a deeply ethical man who, if he believed in the mission of your organization, as he did with Hope — he was devoted," Sister Rose said. He was awarded Hope's 2013 Spirit of Hope Award.

Mr. Casper enjoyed tennis, sailing and boat building, painting in watercolors, and leading hikes and canoe trips.

Would-be hikers had to be careful, though. One of his "little hikes" in New Jersey's Pine Barrens turned out to be "a nine-miler up and down hill," Sister Rose said.

Mr. Casper married Doris S. Casper in 1945. They divorced in 1994. She died in 2013. A son, Edward, died in 1959.

Mr. Casper is survived by sons Stan and Alan; a daughter, Ann; seven grandchildren; a brother; and life partner Maureen Abrams and her children and grandchildren, whom he considered family.

A celebration of life and burial are private.

Donations may be made to JEVS Human Services, 1845 Walnut St., Philadelphia 19103.

✉ bcook@phillynews.com

☎ 610-313-8102



Lee A. Casper

