



Jimmy Darrell Willis

September 25, 1937 - September 21, 2020

Willis, Jimmy D. - Jim passed away peacefully at his home in Estero, Florida just a few days shy of his 83rd birthday on the morning of Sept. 21st with his wife, Patricia Joy, and daughter, Jill, at his side. After a diagnosis of Alzheimer's in 2015 (and later, Lewy Body Dementia), Jim's decline was slow for many years and accelerated in the last few years of his life. He was preceded in death by his parents, Grady and Ola Mae Willis, his older sisters and brothers-in-law Laura Loving (G.B.), Estelle Morrow (Melvin) and Melba Moore (James) and many close friends and numerous four-legged canine kids. He is survived by his wife of nearly 64 years, Joy, children - Jan, Jill and John; grandchildren - Tyler, Luke and Logan; his sister, Ella Maclin, and numerous friends, cousins, nieces and nephews and their children.

He was born on Sept. 25, 1937 in Decatur, Texas - his parents' only son - and was a 1955 graduate of Polytechnic High School in Fort Worth. His first year of college was spent at Arlington State before transferring to Texas Christian University where he majored in business administration. A little over a year after he and Joy got married (November of 1956), Jim began working as a trainee at Hoerner Boxes and switched to night school at TCU. It was this job that would set him on a career path for life. After working for the Fort Worth-based company for three years - when he was just a few credits shy of his degree - he was offered a position at Hoerner's new plant in Gurnee, Illinois. He accepted and he and Joy moved to Gurnee in 1961 where he worked as a production scheduler until he was promoted to a sales position in 1965. It was then that he seemed to find his calling. He was a natural at sales and was not only good at it but genuinely enjoyed calling on customers that eventually became some of his closest friends. He also cemented his life-long love affair with the game of golf while living in Illinois.

Jim had numerous achievements at Hoerner when he went into sales – from increasing his first sales territory from \$135k in 1965 to over \$1 million in 1970 and was the 1973 Salesman of the Year. His nearly 22-year employment with Hoerner (eventually acquired by Champion Int'l in 1977) eventually took him and his family to Richmond, Virginia and, in 1972, to Minneapolis. But he was an entrepreneur at heart and resigned from the

company in 1979 in order to start North Star Containers. The company was officially open for business in 1980 with just 12 employees in a 25,000 square foot space. North Star's sales were \$2 million in 1980 and grew to \$15 million in 1990, and the number of employees grew to 105 working in an 80,000 square-foot building they purchased in 1983.

Many have said he was the best boss they'd ever had. He appreciated hard work and was happy to reward it. He never asked anyone to do anything he wouldn't do himself and tried to pass his work ethic on to all in his sphere of influence. He worked hard and he enjoyed playing as hard as he worked. He and Joy entertained a lot - whether at their home, their cabin, in local restaurants or in winter getaways. He made time for his kids, for golf, fishing, coaching baseball and hockey teams, boating, skiing, snowmobiling, and was always willing to drive across town if one of the kids had a car that wouldn't start or was snowed-in somewhere. Eventually North Star was sold to Menasha in late 1990 where Jim stayed on as General Manager of the North Star plant until his retirement date in 1998. He then continued as a consultant working for the company and helping with the start-up of a plant in St. Cloud until the Spring of 2001. During his years as GM, North Star continued to grow with a record year of \$25 million in sales and 135 employees.

In addition to his love of working and golfing, fishing was another hobby he shared with friends and with his son, John. He and Joy had a cabin in northern Minnesota for many years where he taught the kids how to drive a boat and how to water ski. He loved the camaraderie of his annual fishing trips to either Canada or Alaska with 'the guys.' He enjoyed returning to Texas annually to visit family, and about 25 years ago, he fell in love with the golf course at Wild Cat Run in Estero, Florida. He and Joy bought a house that would eventually be their primary residence but it was big enough to house the kids and grandkids. He never grew tired of good conversations, socializing, eating good food, talking on the phone and entertaining. He was famous for his calls from the car and would try telephone each of his kids almost every day of the week.

He and Joy shared a tremendous love and affection for all their many dogs they had over the years - and many of the ones that their kids had over the years. He even had one 'grand-dog' he was especially fond of and would pick him up to spend the weekend when he came to Minnesota for his monthly work trips from Florida. He loved horses and share this love with one of his daughters - and would visit her horses regularly and continued to go horseback riding periodically up until the late 1990s. He loved to sing - and would love to break into the baritone lines of "Why Me Lord?" He especially loved the festivities and conversations that came with Thanksgiving and Christmas - usually an all-day-long event that ended late on Christmas Eve and started up again on Christmas day.

He was almost always happy to help if someone needed a favor. One friend said he had a heart the size of Texas and that was really his most redeeming quality. He was generous, kind, quick to smile, loyal, honest, and possessed a strong sense of integrity. He loved his family and friends fiercely and always emphasized the importance of fairness - and of working hard! In fact, he continued to ask 'how is work going for you?' almost up until the day of his passing. Whether you were a friend or a family member, you probably got some advice from him at least a few times! And it was a well-known fact to those who were close to him that he considered most of the employees at North Star to be 'family' and/or friends.

Jim loved Joy tremendously and even though he succumbed to Alzheimer's, he never forgot her or their kids. He spent about 8 months at a memory care facility but with the help of Hope Hospice in Florida, he was able to return home shortly before he passed away unexpectedly. He was larger than life in many ways and we thought he would defy the odds and be here for many years to come. He carried a lot of love with him right up until the day of his passing - and continued to express his love for Joy and his children until the very end. He is deeply loved and has left a large hole in our hearts with his passing.

A Celebration of Jim's life is scheduled from 2:30 to 4:30 pm on Saturday, Oct. 24, 2020 at MacMillan Auditorium at The Minnesota Landscape Arboretum in Chaska. Due to Covid, there is limited capacity. Please reach out to the Willis family if you plan to attend so that we can make sure to save a spot for you. In lieu of flowers, we ask you to consider making a donation in Jim's name to Hope Hospice at <http://www.hopehospice.org> or the Lewy Body Dementia Assoc. at <http://www.lbda.org> or the Alzheimer's Assoc. at <http://www.alz.org>

Arrangements are being handled by Shikany's Bonita Funeral Home, Family Owned Since 1978.

Events

OCT **Celebration of Life** 02:30PM - 04:30PM

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MacMillan Auditorium at The Minnesota Landscape Arboretum
3685 Arboretum Drive, Chaska, MN, US, 55318