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West Virginia mourns Underwood

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CHARLESTON -- Former Gov. Cecil H. Underwood, a longtime resident of Huntington between his two terms as governor, died Monday in Charleston. He was 86.

Local and state officials -- whether former political opponents or allies -- hailed him for his work on behalf of the state's economy, better roads and senior citizens issues, among other things.

Mostly, though, they paid tribute to him as a keen public servant.

Underwood was the state's youngest governor when he was elected in 1956 at the age of 34. He became the state's oldest governor 40 years later when he won another term in 1996 at the age of 74.

"The fact that he came back to lead the state in his latter years when it would have been easier to sit back and enjoy retirement at his farm in Tyler County or at his condo in Charleston says he was the type of public servant who always wanted to give," said Huntington attorney David Tyson, who was chairman of the West Virginia Republican Executive Committee for most of Underwood's second term as governor.

Underwood died at Charleston Area Medical Center's Memorial Hospital. He was admitted on Sunday and died Monday afternoon.

Hospital spokesman Dale Witte released this statement on the family's behalf: "The family appreciates the many prayers and concerns that have been expressed in the past."

Barlow-Bonsall Funeral Home, Charleston, said a memorial service is tentatively planned for Monday, Dec. 1 at Christ Church United Methodist, 1221 Quarrier St., Charleston. The time was still to be determined as of Monday night.

The two-term Republican governor suffered a minor stroke in March 2006 and was hospitalized several times since then. His wife, former first lady Hovah Underwood, died in 2004. She had suffered a stroke.

The Underwoods hold a special place in Huntington. Between stays in the Governor's Mansion, the couple lived in Huntington for extended periods -- from 1961 to 1972 and from 1978 until his second term in 1996. They moved back to Huntington after leaving office, then returned to Charleston in 2001.

Cal Kent, a Huntington city councilman and vice president of the Center for Business and Economic Research at Marshall University, served on the Governor's Commission of Fair Taxation



West Virginia Gov. Cecil Underwood greets a joint session of the state legislature before delivering the State of the State address in Charleston, W.Va. on Wednesday, Jan. 14, 1998. Underwood died Monday at age 86.

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during Underwood's second term as governor. The commission completed a thorough review of the state's tax structure and made recommendations for improvement.

"He was always very much concerned about the economic future of the state and tried to reverse the trends as he saw them," Kent said. "That, along with attracting jobs and business to the state, were almost his exclusive focus during his second term."

Gov. Joe Manchin, in a statement released Monday afternoon, said the Underwood family would garner prayers from all West Virginians. He remembered the former governor as a father, grandfather and husband.

"This is a very sad day for all of West Virginia. We have lost a governor who, through two separate terms, served our state and its citizens with honor and dignity and, most importantly, class. We have also lost a dear friend," Manchin said in the prepared release. "When he lost his beloved wife, Hovah, we all knew that things would never be the same for him. They've now been reunited."

Manchin immediately ordered West Virginia and U.S. flags lowered to half-staff at all state-owned facilities. Flags will remain lowered until further notice, spokesman Matt Turner said.

Underwood, a high school teacher from 1943 to 1946, entered politics at the age of 22 when he successfully ran as a Republican for the state House of Delegates representing Tyler County. After serving six terms in the House, he won his first four-year term as the state's chief executive.

He fought the Democratic-controlled Legislature for four years, but was unable to run for re-election because West Virginia's Constitution then limited a governor to one four-year term.

U.S. Sen. Robert C. Byrd, D-W.Va., whose career in the Senate began during Underwood's first term, recalled he and his wife's friendship with the Underwoods. It was a friendship that lasted for more than 50 years.

"They were both wonderful people," Byrd said. "I fondly remember celebrating my 80th birthday at the Governor's Mansion with the Underwoods. A devoted public servant, Cecil's many contributions to the great state of West Virginia will never be forgotten. Those of us fortunate enough to call him a friend will always remember his engaging personality and personal warmth."

Tyson said he was fortunate to spend a lot of time together traveling across the state during Underwood's second term.

"I enjoyed immensely the time I spent with him and tried to model my political thinking and the way I conduct myself after Governor Underwood," he said. "He was a great man and indeed a true public servant, much like Ken Hechler and others who devoted their entire lives to West Virginia."

Craig Underwood described nearly every moment spent with his father as "wonderful."

The younger Underwood, who was born the day after his father took office for the first time, described the governor as a phenomenal role model for his three children. "He taught us to help others that are less fortunate," Craig Underwood said. "I know that's why he got into politics in the first place and stayed active in not just the political arena, but all things social."

The state's highest-ranking Republican, U.S. Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, remembered Underwood as a "true servant" to the state.

"As an educator and a first-class leader, he put our state first and touched the lives of countless West Virginians," Capito said in a prepared release. "We can all celebrate, honor and remember his commitment to public service and to the people of West Virginia."

Underwood was drafted to run for governor in 1996, and defeated Democrat Charlotte Pritt, carrying 38 of the state's 55 counties.

He called his triumphant return to the governor's office "the most gratifying political experience I ever had."

"I feel very saddened for his family," Pritt said. "He, as an educator, had a long, distinguished service for the state of West Virginia in many capacities."

The success of the 1996 election came after several failed attempts to win elected office after his first term as governor.

In 1960, Underwood unsuccessfully tried to unseat popular U.S. Sen. Jennings Randolph. He lost a 1964 attempt to regain the governor's office.

Four years later, he lost the GOP's nomination for governor to U.S. Rep. Arch Moore. After losing to Moore in a close primary race, Underwood went into political exile for eight years.

Moore said the state lost a "fine West Virginian" with Underwood's death.

"He served our state in a very excellent way," he said.

Underwood's return to statewide politics in 1976 was not successful, either. He lost to Democrat Jay Rockefeller by 250,000 votes, the worst defeat in Underwood's political career.

Rockefeller, now a U.S. senator, remembered Underwood as "a man of profound faith, a forward-looking leader, and a public servant in the truest sense."

"He'll be remembered as someone who dedicated his entire life and career to the causes of people around him," Rockefeller said in his prepared release.

Underwood was inducted into the Greater Huntington Wall of Fame in 2001-- a recognition of not only what he did for the state but for the Huntington area.

Robert Roswall, executive director of the Cabell County Community Service Organization, said the former governor was crucial in the establishment of the Cecil H. Underwood Senior Center on 9th Avenue in Huntington. During his second term, Roswall said Underwood appointed a liaison to work directly with local senior citizen efforts and provided more than \$300,000 for the construction of the center.

"His ongoing legacy in Huntington will be his time spent and efforts to further the development of a senior citizen center in his community," Roswall said. "He cared greatly about the work he was

doing."

The Children's Home Society of West Virginia renamed its shelter in Ona after Underwood's late wife in 2006. The former governor was said to be a supporter and friend of the Children's Home Society. He put together a team of colleagues and pledged to raise \$500,000 for the Huntington Child Shelter.

Kent said he thinks Underwood's lasting contribution to the state was his dedication to improving roads when he served as governor from 1956 to 1960.

"In my opinion, he was the one who brought the interstate highway system to West Virginia," Kent said. "It was a long process that took many years to complete, but he was there at the beginning."

West Virginia Senate President Earl Ray Tomblin recalled Underwood as an honest politician who embodied the highest ideals and was willing to compromise with his opponents in the Democratic Party.

"Not only is his passing a tremendous loss for the state, but for me personally, because of the strong bond of personal friendship we developed in our respective roles," Tomblin said in a statement.

Underwood held a number of jobs between his terms as governor, including serving as president of Bethany College and stints at Huntington-based Island Creek Coal Co., Monsanto Corp. and the New York Life Insurance Co.

He lost to former Democrat Gov. Bob Wise in the 2000 election. Wise, who now serves as president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, said he was sorry to hear of Underwood's death.

"He devoted his entire life to West Virginia in many different ways -- as its chief executive, in education, and in business," he said. "He left a legacy that in so many ways has improved life for generations of West Virginians. He constantly demonstrated how to govern effectively in a bipartisan manner. He was a gentleman in the finest sense of the word."

Douglas E. McKinney, chairman of the state Republican Party, recalled Underwood instituting the Hi-Y Youth in Government Program, which still affords students the opportunity to learn firsthand about state government.

"It inspired many to take active roles in the political arena and was a source of great pride to him. He continued to play an active role in the program as an adviser and supporter until his death," he said. "His soft-spoken manner and an ever ready joke were his trademarks, which gained one's attention to hear his thoughtful and erudite messages. They also earned him the respect which allowed him to pass his legislative agendas in spite of overwhelming Democrat majorities."

Born in 1922 in Josephs Mills, Underwood spent all of his early years in Tyler County, graduating from Tyler County High School in 1939 and Salem College in 1943. He earned a master's degree from West Virginia University in 1952.

Underwood joined the staff of Marietta (Ohio) College in 1946. He went to Salem in 1950 as vice president, a post he held until being elected governor.

He and his wife Hovah, a native of Grantsville, were the parents of a one son, Craig, and two daughters, Cecilia and Sharon. He also had five grandchildren.

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