

In Memoriam

A Special Tribute

Gerald R. Ford—38th President of the United States
and Michigan Lawyer

1913–2006

By Naseem Stecker

Grand Rapids' most beloved son, Gerald R. Ford, was laid to rest on the grassy banks of the Grand River earlier this month. The 38th president of the United States died at age 93 at Rancho Mirage, California, December 26, 2006. President Ford had deep roots in Michigan and many close friends here. He grew up in Grand Rapids and practiced law there for some years. He was a member of the State Bar for 55 years. In September 2004, the Bar honored him by dedicating a Michigan Legal Milestone in Grand Rapids. A plaque (see photo) highlighting his career was unveiled at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum, where he is now buried. The following are some recollections and tributes to President Ford from long-time friends and members of the Michigan legal community.

My association with the late President Gerald R. Ford, for the most part, occurred during my seven terms in the U.S. House of Representatives (1960–1974), although I did have a couple of visits with him while I was serving as a U.S. District Judge for the Eastern District of Michigan. During the years I was in Congress, the Republicans in the Michigan congressional delegation met for breakfast once a week to discuss pending legislation and problems concerning Michigan. You get to know your colleagues pretty well meeting that often. I was always proud to be a colleague of Jerry Ford during those years. Not only was he knowledgeable on the issues, friendly, courteous, and understanding of your problems, but he was always trustworthy and a man of his word. He said what he meant and meant what he said. There was nothing devious about Jerry Ford, and I think that one of the legacies he leaves is that good character does count in public officials. Like the late President Truman, who also was maligned and had difficulties while in office, Ford made the big decisions right. In his case, the pardon of Richard Nixon, for which he will always be remembered, but which well served our country. As one who greatly admired him, I mourn his passing and feel that I have lost a friend.

*Hon. R. James Harvey
U.S. Service District Judge (Retired)
Naples, Florida*



When I joined Law Weathers in 1979, I was made aware of President Ford's connection to the firm by the many stories other attorneys told me—how they helped research the 25th Amendment before President Nixon's resignation and of their partner, Phil Buchen, who became White House counsel to President Ford....My first contacts with President Ford involved correspondence, phone conversations, and a meeting with him in the early '90s while representing his family in some business and personal issues. I found him to be compassionate, straightforward, and always interested in the "bigger picture."

...I also had significant contact with Jerry Ford through my participation in The University of Michigan Alumni Club of Grand Rapids. I was president of the club at the time, and we were doing some fundraising for our scholarship program for high-school students from West Michigan who wished to attend the University of Michigan....I called President Ford and asked him for help. The club had made 500 prints of a painting of the U of M campus and I asked if he would sign these prints. Although he had never agreed to sign prints in the past, he immediately agreed to my request and, although it took him three days to do so, he signed every one. Because he had agreed to my request, I was also able to persuade Coach Bo Schembechler and two alums of significant notoriety, James Earl Jones and Astronaut Jack Lousma, to add their signatures to the prints. To date, this has been a wonderful fundraiser for our club's scholarship program.

...Jerry Ford was always willing to help a hometown cause. He never forgot his roots. He taught me about loyalty to a group, whether it is your college, your firm, your family, or your hometown. He also taught me that actions speak louder than words. People often give "lip service" to helping out a cause or an event, but Jerry was always there participating whenever he could to make sure it was a success. That's what I took from Jerry Ford over the years; that loyalty, honesty, and hard work are three traits that can make your life very fulfilling, not just for you but for the people around you.

*Kevin Krauss
Law Weathers and Richardson PC
Grand Rapids*



"Jerry Ford was always willing to help a hometown cause. He never forgot his roots."

I am a veteran of World War II. I had graduated from the University of Michigan Law School in 1942, but went right into the army....In the summer of 1948, I was a very busy person. I was prosecuting attorney of Ottawa County. I was teaching a class at Hope College. I was married, with a little daughter, and in practice with my father, who attracted a lot of business to our law firm.

Phil Buchen, whom I had known and much respected at the University of Michigan Law School, came to see me at my office. Phil said, "I hear that you refused to sign Barney's (Bartel J. Jonkman) petition for reelection to Congress." I admitted that it was true and that, as the newly elected commander of the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars, with a membership of over 800 veterans, I would campaign for a veteran. Phil Buchen said his law partner in Grand Rapids was running for Congress. I said I would have to meet him because I wouldn't support anyone who was incompetent, a liar, or a wise guy.

The next day I became acquainted with Jerry Ford, who, I used to say, only had one defect—that he had been in the Navy in WWII and not the Army. From that day on, I campaigned for Jerry Ford and lined up the members of the American Legion and VFW for Jerry in both Holland and Grand Haven. I introduced Jerry Ford to a gathering of over a thousand people during that first campaign for the nomination, and always ended with, "Barney's too tired. Jerry's full of energy." Our relationship remained close ever since.

When I became United States district attorney, each year on Memorial Day, I filled in at speeches for Senator Potter and for Congressman Ford, who was busy in Washington working for us. When Senator Bob Griffin called for me to come to Washington 31 years ago to witness my confirmation as a U.S. district judge, we were joined by Vice President Jerry Ford, who was largely responsible for my appointment to the federal bench.

*Hon. Wendell A. Miles, Senior Judge
U.S. District Court
Western District of Michigan
Grand Rapids*



I was chairman of President Ford's Foundation for 21 years up to this last year. Now I'm chairman emeritus and Jack Ford, his son, is chairman. So I had a close relationship with him for 21 years, both professionally and personally. I had the luxury and the pleasure of being first-hand with him in many personal conversations and dealings with the foundation. There is absolutely no question that he forged out of his Midwestern upbringing and, in particular, in Grand Rapids, a sense of values. In the words of Jim Cannon, who wrote *Time and Chance*, "Grand Rapids is a place where a man journeys far but never leaves," and that really was the case with President Ford. He journeyed to Michigan, to Yale, to the South Pacific, to Washington, to California, and to Colorado, but he never left because he forged in his

formative years a sense of values from his family and other sources that he took with him and carried throughout his lifetime both in public service and afterward. His characteristics of decency and civility and courage—these qualities came from that upbringing.

Martin J. Allen, Jr.

Chairman Emeritus, Gerald R. Ford Foundation



Gerald R. Ford defined public service. He always put the interest of the country first, even knowing that the ultimate cost to him might be great. Although it was difficult to see at first, we now know how courageous his actions as president were. He thought only of putting our country back on the right track. We would all do well to emulate his spirit of having adversaries and not enemies. He spent many years representing his beloved Grand Rapids in the House of Representatives and, when he became vice president and president, he represented Michigan with distinction. Even when he left public life, he always thought of Michigan, putting his library in Ann Arbor and his library and burial location in Grand Rapids, hoping they would bring benefits to those two cities he loved so much.

*Kimberly M. Cabill, President
State Bar of Michigan*



My acquaintance with President Ford is of long-standing duration. The first time I met him was at a pep assembly at Ottawa Hills High School in Grand Rapids. I became chairman of the County Republican Committee after the 1960 election and worked closely with him during that time. I got to know him and was very impressed with his personality and his ability to put people from all walks of life at ease. He was well received by the people of Grand Rapids, whether they were blue collar workers or executives.

I got to know him as a very good administrator of his office. People remarked about his constituent services, and the people who worked for him were very proactive in helping out constituents in that community. Jerry was always a person who worked extremely hard and effectively, both in Washington and in conveying his position to his constituents. Jerry was well respected by both the national Republicans and Democrats, and his opinions were well respected by those on the other side of the aisle in Congress. His honesty was beyond reproach.

In short, Jerry Ford was my mentor and my friend. I learned how to disagree with people without being disagreeable. I learned how to think beyond shallow local issues, and I think I had my rough edges smoothed. These are lessons that a young lawyer will never forget, and I will always feel indebted to him. People in this country are now starting to realize, on reflection, what a great president and national leader he was.

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