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Joe K. Byrd

None - Sept. 18, 2008

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Joe K. Byrd, long-time Burke County attorney, passed away peacefully on Thursday, September 18, 2008, in Drexel, North Carolina, with members of his large family surrounding him. He was 84 years old. A beloved partner, father, brother, uncle, friend, and colleague, Joe was also a compassionate advocate for many. He was an appreciative man who mined the depths of what life had to offer and a humble one who took pleasure in simple acts of love and kindness. He felt that days should begin with his cat Buddy on his shoulder and the crossword puzzle solved with his wife Gleta. He summed his life recently by saying "It was a good ride".His life ended 3 miles away from where it began, being born to Edward H. and Elva Duckworth Byrd. After an education in the Drexel schools where he graduated valedictorian, he began his college education at Berea College in Kentucky and concluded at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Law School in 1950.Mr. Byrd’s life was a picture of service to mankind in military, legal, political, religious, and family relationships.During World War II, he served in the Army Infantry for three years in England, France, Holland, the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium, and was decorated with the Bronze Star for missions behind enemy lines in Germany. He served 28 years in the Army Reserves before retiring as a full colonel and brigade commander.His legal career of four decades began as a solo practice in Morganton, N.C., expanded in 1955 when his brother Bob joined him, and concluded in 1989 when he retired as the senior partner of the firm that he established. His legal activities read like Who’s Who

senior partner of the firm that he established. His legal activities read like Who's Who in the legal profession. He served as Burke County Criminal Court Solicitor from 1951 to 1954. From 1953 – 1973 he was Drexel Town Attorney. He served as President of the Burke County Bar and the 25th Judicial Bar Associations. He was a member of the NC State Bar, United States Supreme Court Bar and helped to establish the North Carolina Academy of Trial Lawyers.Byrd praised his brother Bob and other law partners for their support over the years, support that allowed him the opportunities to pursue a corresponding career in public service. During that time, he was elected to the NC House of Representatives in 1958 and later appointed to the Senate in 1965. He served in the Senate through 1968, during which time he was the co-sponsor with John Umstead of the legislative bills that created and opened Western Carolina Center in 1962 in Morganton. Beginning in 1960, he worked with others to establish Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton.Mr. Byrd had a lifelong involvement with mental health issues, growing from his mother's career working with the mentally ill as an occupational therapist at Broughton Hospital. He was appointed by Governor Terry Sanford in 1961 to the North Carolina Commission to study the needs of retarded children. He served under Gov. Bob Scott as chairman of the State Board of Mental Health from 1968 until 1973, promoting the development of mental health facilities statewide, including Broughton Hospital.Mr. Byrd was a member of Drexel First Baptist since 1947, serving as choir member, deacon emeritus, and Sunday School teacher for over 52 years. His convictions many years ago led that church to eliminate race as a limitation upon membership and gender as a limitation upon ordination of ministers and deacons.His convictions to work for the downtrodden and the poor live on through his support for humanitarian causes including Habitat for Humanity, Bread Ministries at Drexel First Baptist Church, and the support and creation of sister churches in Cape Town, South Africa, South Mountain Baptist Camp, the Drexel Foundation which owned and operated the Drexel Community Center, and Western Piedmont Community College's Huffman-Byrd Scholarship Fund honoring R. O. Huffman, and the Chad B. Cole Scholarship Fund honoring the son of his best friends, Sherrill and Glenda Cole.Mr. Byrd is survived by his high school sweetheart and wife of 61 years, Gleta Harris Byrd, seven children: Elaine Farge of Alameda CA, Ann Martin and her husband Frank of Wilson, and local children Joe K Byrd, Jr. and his wife Vickie, Jane Poteat and her husband Johnny, Jim Byrd, Phil Byrd and his wife Rhonda, and Eric Byrd, all of Drexel, six

grandchildren: Tonya Williams, Cheryl Brackett and her husband Chad, Erin Byrd, Allison Byrd, Danielle Byrd and Hannah Martin, 4 great-grandchildren: Brentani and Kreg Fulbright and Chase and Cydney Brackett, and numerous nieces and nephews.In addition to his parents Edward and Elva Byrd, he was preceded in death by six siblings: Albert (Ab), Edna Faye Lowry (Boots), Elva Hoke (Tot), Lucy Neil, Ed (Junior) and Robert Bond (Bob).The memorial service will be held at 3:00 pm on Sunday, Sept. 21, 2008, at Drexel First Baptist Church with the Rev. Tito Madrazo officiating.Memorials may be made to the Huffman-Byrd Scholarship at Western Piedmont Community College, 1001 Burkemont Ave., Morganton, NC, 28655; the Drexel First Baptist Church Expansion Fund, P.O. Box 308, Drexel, NC, 28619; and Berea College, Berea, KY, 40404.Sossoman Funeral Home is assisting the family with the arrangements.

Tribute Wall

No tributes added yet.