



Former CSUEB president McCune dies

Written by Donna Hemmila
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Ellis McCune, who served as Cal State East Bay president for 23 years leading the university through times of turmoil and expansion, died Tuesday from complications of pneumonia. He was 84.

McCune passed away at a Palm Desert, Calif., nursing home where he had been living off and on since February, according to his son, James McCune.

"Ellis McCune was a strong leader and laid a foundation that this university continues to build on today," said President Norma Rees. " He remained a close friend of our university."

Known for his signature bow ties and outgoing personality, McCune led the university from 1967 to his retirement in 1990. He then served 18 months as acting chancellor for the California State University system.

"He had a sense of place about what a university means to society, but he was never elitist," said Anne Marie Peters, who was his executive aide from 1983 to 1990. "He was very comfortable to be around in spite of being very bright, well-read and well-traveled."

Peters described McCune as the "quintessential academic" who wore hand-tied bow ties, blazers with elbow patches and smoked a pipe in his office back when it was permissible inside university buildings.

"He had a wonderful sense of humor, sparkling blue eyes and a wonderful smile," said Peters.

McCune, born in Houston, Texas, told a newspaper interviewer in 1974 that he had gone to college later in life. After high school, he worked as grocery clerk, construction laborer and seller of fried chicken from a cart. During WWII, he played drums and cymbals in the Air Force Band.

After the war he attended UCLA where he earned bachelor's and doctoral degrees in political science. He taught at Occidental College and California State University, Northridge.

McCune was the dean of academic planning for what was then called the California State Universities and Colleges system when he was tapped for the role of interim president of the 10-year-old university in Hayward. He was called in to replace the university's first president, Fred Harclerod, whom the chancellor's office had assigned to other duties.

It was a period of upheaval for the university and the country as students were rioting at many campuses, particularly in nearby UC Berkeley. McCune remembers his father dealing with potential student rioters in Hayward and being barricaded in his office.

"Students tried to have a riot," McCune said. "But he stepped in and squashed it right away."

In a speech to faculty at the 1970 academic convocation, McCune lamented the upheavals universities were facing:

"Most of us used to look forward to (fall) as an opportunity to see again our colleagues, our students, the library and the other familiar features of academe. The intellectual climate of the campus was sought out as a welcome sanctuary - a retreat from troubles and cares of the day-to-day world. Such, I fear, is no loner the case. Far from being a retreat from the cares of the society at large, the campus has become a battleground. "

Still he enjoyed the challenges of being a university president, said Peters, who last visited with McCune in January when he had returned from a cruise through the Panama Canal.

After his retirement from the chancellor's post, James McCune said, his father enjoyed traveling and had been to nearly every country on the planet. He was also active in the Bohemian Club.

McCune is survived by his wife, Hilda, who will be 90 on April 29; his son, James; his daughter-in-law, Barbara; and one step-grandchild. He was cremated and no funeral is planned.

A memorial service will be held for the Cal State East Bay community in the spring. Those wishing to honor the memory of Ellis McCune may contribute to the Ellis and Hilda McCune Scholarship Fund. For information, call 510 885-2360.

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