

VERNE C. JOHNSON PUBLIC POLICYMAKER

A state public-policy giant, he 'thought of all us as family'

• The onetime legislator helped improve and broaden governance as executive director of the Citizens League and in other roles.

By TIM HARLOW 11-7-2012
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The dramatic modernization of Minnesota government in the middle of the 20th century bears Verne C. Johnson's strong imprint. As executive director of the Citizens League during a fruitful period from 1958 to 1967, he helped create the Metropolitan Council, metro tax-base sharing and more equitable funding of schools, transportation and public safety.



Verne C. Johnson

His strengths — building relationships and listening to differing viewpoints — led to his unique role in state history, championing citizens' causes and concerns in many roles across his lifetime.

He also served as a state legislator, a strategic planner at General Mills and most recently head of the Civic Caucus, a nonpartisan organization whose mission is to stimulate and maintain people's involvement in public affairs.

"He was masterful at bringing people together to work for the common cause," said his son, Dwight, of Fountain Hills, Ariz. "One of his favorite lines was 'Seek ye first to understand, then be understood.' He wanted to make Minnesota a better place."

Johnson died Friday at his Bloomington home after a bout with pancreatic cancer and lymphoma. He was 87.

His career in public policy started in the late 1940s when, fresh out of the University of Minnesota Law School, he helped the ranks of the Young Republican League grow from 800 to more than 3,000 members. In his 20s, he served in the Minnesota House and also for three years as administrative assistant to U.S. Rep. Walter Judd, R-Minn.

Decades later, he was still actively pursuing change. As recently as last month, he was still running meetings for the Civic Caucus, a discussion group composed of legislators, community leaders and citizens who meet weekly to discuss education, health care, transportation, finances, energy and the economy. Johnson founded the caucus more than 50 years ago with four members and only expanded it in 2005. Now more than 3,500 people participate in discussions on its website, www.civiccaucus.org.

In the months before his death, he also was working to open a new charter school in Minneapolis for underprivileged and underperforming sixth- to 12th-graders.

"He surrounded himself with good thinkers," said Paul Gilje, the caucus' coordinator. "He was, above all, a man of action and results. He was very much devoted to that. He wanted there to be real successes."

That was the case when Johnson presided over the Citizens League from 1957 to 1967. The league has been described as the petri dish from which the Met Council, Metro Transit and the "Minnesota Miracle" tax structure grew in the 1960s and '70s. During his tenure, the U.S. Army veteran worked with state and local government to improve public policy and expanded the league's efforts from research to action.

After his tenure there, he spent 15 years at General Mills as vice president of strategic planning. In that role, he pioneered a for-profit model of corporate philanthropy. His accomplishments included establishing the National Chronic Care Consortium and Elder Homestead Homes, an assisted-living facility.

"Verne was a very active General Mills volunteer in the community, directly engaged in improving housing for elderly citizens and oth-

er community work," said Reatha Clark King, former president of the General Mills Foundation.

Although a giant in state public policy, Johnson's top priorities were his Christian faith and family. Johnson never missed his children's athletic events, and he regularly held "Gabs with Gramps" mentoring sessions with his grandchildren, his son said.

Johnson was a longtime member of Mount Olivet Lutheran Church in south Minneapolis and had attended Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie for the past 20 years.

His devotion to family dovetailed with his love for public policy.

"What motivated Verne's commitment was value of family in the larger sense," former Sen. Dave Durenberger said in a tribute posted on the Citizens League's website. "If you look at his record in the Citizens League, at General Mills, in the community, in housing and long-term care and health care changes, his marks are all over it. He thought of all us as family."

Johnson was preceded in death by his wife of 55 years, Carol. In addition to his son Dwight, he is survived by another son, Ron, of Atherton, Calif., who is CEO of J.C. Penney and was keynote speaker Oct. 25 at the Citizens League's 60th-anniversary celebration; a daughter, Diane Flynn of Menlo Park, Calif.; a brother, Dennis, of Philadelphia, and six grandchildren.

Visitation will be from 5:30 to 7 p.m. Friday at the Washburn-McReavy Chapel, 5000 W. 50th St., Edina. Burial will be at 9 a.m. Saturday at Fort Snelling National Cemetery in Bloomington, followed at noon by a "Celebration of Life" service at Wooddale Church, 6630 Shady Oak Rd., Eden Prairie.

Staff writer Lori Sturdevant contributed to this report.

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