

Friends remember Art Phillips, a ‘lovely and inspiring’ man

BY ZOE MCKNIGHT, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 26, 2013



Carole Taylor says hello to family and friends during the memorial for her late husband Art Phillips.

Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, PNG

In the midst of a heated provincial election campaign, current and former politicians put aside partisanship to pay tribute to their friend and beloved former mayor Art Phillips at a memorial service Friday.

Phillips' brief tenure as Vancouver mayor from 1973 to 1976 was hailed as “visionary” and the man was celebrated for his commitment to public service and what would come to be known around the world as Vancouverism: mixed-use, high density neighbourhoods and a vibrant downtown core. Phillips died on March 29 at 82.

In the packed hotel ballroom just blocks from the newly dedicated Art Phillips Park, current Vancouver mayor Gregor Robertson was also on hand to pay his respects.

“Art was a great inspiration to me personally in my decision to pursue the mayor’s chair. He’s someone that transformed the role and gave us all an opportunity to be more innovative in politics,” Robertson said before a goosebump-inducing rendition of You Take the High Road by men’s choir Chor Leoni.

“He was a big part in getting beyond left-right politics in the 1970s and we’re trying to do that today. It’s a challenging endeavour in B.C.”

Even for a generation too young to remember Phillips as mayor, his fingerprints are all over Vancouver, in particular its downtown skyline and the development of False Creek South, which was once an industrial area.

In his inaugural mayoral speech, Phillips promised to scrap a planned downtown expressway through Strathcona, to rezone downtown neighbourhoods to encourage residential development, to discourage sprawl by building up other regional centres in Metro Vancouver, to plant trees, to protect Stanley Park and to take back the waterfront. All of it was done.

“It’s remarkable how much Art Phillips accomplished in 4 years for our city — accomplishments which I believe have shaped who we are today,” said Premier Christy Clark.

“Both in public office and private life he served the people of Vancouver with energy, imagination, and most of all, for the right reasons,” she said in an email after the service.

In contrast to previous pro-development parties, Phillips and his centrist TEAM (The Electors’ Action Movement) party forced developers and planners to include quality-of-life considerations, opened up council meetings to the public and encouraged citizen participation and consultation.

The arrival of TEAM at city hall was a “transformative moment,” for Vancouver, said NDP leader Adrian Dix.

“One that had lasting impact on the entire city in a positive way. In terms of modern Vancouver, that transition was a significant one,” he said, adding Phillips’ position on social housing and transportation was an inspiration to him personally.

Former Liberal premier Gordon Campbell said his mentor Phillips, who hired a young Campbell as his executive assistant during the 1970s, said no one was more influential to his own political career. He recalled sitting with Phillips, then an alderman, as a university student and intern back in 1969.

“There’s no one that did more for me than Art in terms of encouragement. He was a great guy and a great friend,” said Campbell, who was himself elected to Vancouver city council before becoming a three-term mayor, premier of B.C. and now Canada’s High Commissioner to the U.K.

“I was lucky because I was a young guy, and there was not a meeting he went to that I was not invited to ... It was an incredible opportunity for me and he could not have been better to me.”

It’s partly because of Phillips’ influence Vancouver is recognized as one of the best cities to live and work in, said former Liberal Senator Jack Austin in comments focused on Phillips’ public service in municipal and, briefly, federal politics in 1980.

“He acted on no personal need. Art Phillips saw a need in his community and believed he could make a difference. He accepted the challenge, he served in an exemplary way, he left his community better

for that.”

Phillips’s wife Carole Taylor, former MLA and finance minister under her husband’s protege Campbell, elected not to speak at the service, but two of their six children made short remarks.

“I remember having a great view of the world riding on Dad’s six-foot shoulders,” said eldest daughter Sue Biddle, whose youngest sister Samantha Kadera divulged lesser-known facts about her father: his sweet tooth, how he once packed her a peanut butter and jam sandwich for lunch 365 days in a row, how he once won a Mother of the Year award at her school, to Taylor’s chagrin.

Other speakers noted Phillips’ confidence, optimism and storied athleticism, particularly in basketball as a University of B.C. Thunderbird. And childhood friend Barry Downs recalled taking car rides with his friend late in life.

“At these times, there was love in his smile and in his eyes. He revealed as always a courageous and compassionate man who dearly enjoyed life and all those around him. Arturo — as Carole endearingly calls him — this lovely and inspiring man will be greatly missed by us all.”

zmcknight@vancouversun.com

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