



Wilmer St. Clair Cody Jr.

JAN 1, 1937 - NOV 8, 2021



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Wilmer St. Clair Cody Jr. passed away in Covington, Louisiana, on November 8, 2021, at the age of 84. His career as a public school administrator and policymaker spanned 50 years.

He began his professional journey in the early 1960s, as a classroom teacher and school principal in his hometown of Mobile, Alabama. His family is proud to recall that he insisted upon enrolling a wheelchair-bound young girl in elementary school, over bureaucratic opposition, some 25 years before passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. His enthusiastic support for mainstream education of disabled children continued throughout his career.

It is important to remember that being a school administrator in the South during the 1960s and 1970s was dangerous. Open demagoguery over race relations was a regular part of public affairs, and many civil rights activists were beaten or murdered. As an active supporter of school desegregation in Mobile, Cody received late-night phone calls threatening the lives of his children. The personal threats continued at other postings. Cody's brother-in-law, James A. Burns, a school superintendent in Muscogee County, Georgia, was murdered in 1992.

During this period, the prevention of school violence was a constant preoccupation and a large part of the job of any school leader. Cody's first position as a school superintendent was in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, during the initial phases of desegregation. Named to the position at 29, he was the youngest superintendent in the country at the time. A local newspaper cartoon illustrated Cody under his desk, relieved to discover that a loud rumbling was only an earthquake and NOT more unrest at the local high school.

In 1973, Cody assumed the superintendency in Birmingham, Alabama, which was only beginning to emerge from an infamous period of racial conflict. As an indicator of his seriousness and commitment to change, he enrolled his children at schools that had seen bloody race riots only a few months previously. He devised and implemented a plan that eventually settled a civil rights case dating from 1960. It kept the peace, avoided forced school busing, and allowed more and



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more children to attend school with others of different races. The federal judge who ultimately released the school board from the consent decree said that “this desegregation was the best job that has been done in the country.” Cody and the police chief also brokered a deal with local gangs that kept violent turf wars away from the school buildings. In the midst of all of this, Cody persuaded the voters of Birmingham to approve a substantial property tax increase that enabled the accreditation of the elementary schools for the first time ever.

In the second half of his career, Cody was a leader in increasing performance standards throughout K-12 education. He was a program officer in the earliest days of the National Institute of Education, and a longtime board member at the National Assessment of Educational Progress. As Louisiana State Superintendent of Education, he began the process of competency testing for teachers. Opposition was loud and well organized; the governor at the time, Buddy Roemer, would refer to Cody as “a brave man.” As Commissioner of Education for the state of Kentucky, Cody polished up the student assessment program. As he left the state, his board chair said, “Most importantly, our schools are showing real progress in meeting the high standards we’ve set for them.”

In his later years he served on the Smithsonian National Board, and helped them with their education programs. He also came to believe that American schools were spending too much class time and placing too much emphasis on standardized testing.

Cody was proud of his Harvard education, but he would often quip that “There is no such thing as ‘higher’ ed, there is only later ed.” Once, during a job interview in Dallas, a right-wing board member asked him if he was a secular humanist. “Well, no,” he said, “I’m an incompetent fisherman.”

He did love fishing and hunting and was a crack wing shot. At various times he piloted a small plane, sailed on Chesapeake Bay, Mobile Bay, and Lake Pontchartrain, and built or rebuilt several wooden boats. He was a connoisseur of oysters. He loved to sing, and was active in choir groups in high school and college.

Cody met his wife, Caroline Burns Cody, at choir practice at Dauphin Way United Methodist Church in Mobile. They were married for 58 years, until she passed away in 2016. He leaves his son David Cody, his daughter-in-law Sara Orton, his daughter Alison Cody, and many thousands



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of people who were a little bit better at reading, writing, mathematics, and getting along with others because of something he did.

A memorial service will be held at Rayne Memorial United Methodist Church, 3900 St Charles Ave, New Orleans, LA 70115 at 11:00 a.m. on Friday, April 22, 2022. Reception to follow in the church. In lieu of flowers, the family encourages contributions to www.mobilebaykeeper.org.

E. J. Fielding Funeral Home has been entrusted with the arrangements. The family invites you to share thoughts, fond memories, and condolences online at E. J. Fielding Funeral Home Guest Book at www.ejfieldingfh.com.



Tribute Wall

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IA

Iris L Anderson posted:

Please accept my love and sympathy at your loss. It is my loss also because I was friend with both Wilmer and Caroline through school and all the years since. We had lunch many times in Mobile at our High School Class Gatherings and Class Reunions. I shall miss him as I have missed Caroline. From school days on we have all been family. They will not be easily forgotten. - Iris Lundy Anderson and Billy

April 20 at 2:18 PM

LK

Lisa Kennedy posted:

I am so sorry for your loss Sally and David. Your father was a wonderful man, both intelligent and compassionate. What a fabulous combination. Not many people leave the kind of imprint on the world he did. He will be missed. Kind regards, Lisa Williams Kennedy

April 12 at 1:51 PM

EP

Errol T, Pharris, Sr. posted:

He was a great educator. His zeal for maintaining a productive school system in Birmingham , Alabama can not be matched by anyone. He appointed me as school principal in 1977. I grew under his leadership and his wife's Caroline. We were all very proud our superintendent. He was exactly what Birmingham City School System needed. May God bless his soul. Errol T. Pharris

April 10 at 12:58 PM

NE

Nedraloftin posted:

Years ago, I was blessed to work alongside Dr Cody. He was a gentleman and a scholar! He wanted everyone to be successful and he built the foundation for many. His goodness lives on. NEDRA

April 10 at 11:32 AM

TR

Trina posted:

So sorry for your loss Sally and David. He sounds like a wonderful person who definitely left the world a better place. -Trina

November 30 at 7:34 AM



Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring Wilmer by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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