

THANKS, ELLIS DUNN

His voice wasn't the loudest in the room, but it was always the friendliest

The public record shows that Ellis Dunn was an educator, restaurateur and volunteer. Fortunately, his legacy goes into much greater detail.

Dunn — a former Clark College professor and administrator who had suffered from lung cancer in recent years — died Saturday in Trout Lake while visiting his daughter. He was 77.

Ellis will be remembered in many local circles as one of the most amiable gentlemen in his community. A great listener and innovative risk-taker, Dunn had this way of prying open narrow discussions and setting them on the track of conciliation and mutual understanding. His voice wasn't the loudest in the room, but it was always the friendliest.

Clark College thought enough of his three decades of service there to honor him in 2008 by designating the Ellis F. Dunn Community Room in Gaiser Hall.

Ridgefield thought enough of his warm personality and civic contributions to name him grand marshal of last year's July 4 parade.

The Fort Vancouver Regional Library District will remember Dunn for his valuable service on its board. He was a moderating force, the type of leader who calmly doused flames of unproductive passion in other people and turned adversaries into partners.

Such a charmed legacy, though, should never be mistaken for a charmed life. Times were tough for Ellis from the Leap Day he was born in 1932 to the death of his father when Ellis was 4, to the Dust Bowl ravages that tore through the Texas Panhandle and aggravated his asthma, prompting his mother to send him at age 8 — traveling by himself — to relatives in California.

Later in life, even in the three

circles where he made his greatest contributions (the college, Ridgefield and the library), Dunn continually had to guide others beyond their own contention. He helped Clark College endure several leadership transitions. He helped Ridgefield residents regain their pride in recent years after numerous controversies in earlier years had engulfed the city council, the police department and the school district. Ten years ago, at age 67, he bought the old Pioneer Street

Cafe, occupancy 36, built in 1903. "It's been a lot of fun," he told a reporter a few years later. "Today I'll go out and clean the grease trap and scrub down the grill."

As a library advocate, Dunn taught his allies how to shake off a ballot-measure defeat and focus on ballot-measure victories to come. His

advice emboldened library activists toward initiatives that would create new programs in new buildings at new sites.

Dunn's team-building talents and willingness to consider other views were showcased in this passage from a 1996 letter to the editor, when as chair of the library board, he lobbied for passage of a bond measure: "We will not decide without all available facts and all available public input. We will study population trends to see where the greatest need is. We will study traffic patterns to assure that each library is accessible. We will study costs to get the most for our money. We will carefully consider patron safety and security. And we will hold well-advertised public hearings. Only then will we decide." That's the kind of man Ellis Dunn was, always listening, always moving forward.

Today's civic activists often seem to drift toward acrimony and contention. That's why the loss of Ellis Dunn's calming influence will be so profoundly felt by so many people in his community.

"I always thought of education as a public service. There are a lot of similarities. And I always learned from my students."

Ellis Dunn

QUOTED IN A 2003
COLUMBIAN STORY