

Tribute to David G Mathiasen

The budget world, the public sector, the United States and the world lost a giant when Dave Mathiasen died on June 13.

I first met Dave and Carolyn in late 1976 when my husband and I bought the house next door on Ashmead Place in Kalorama Triangle. In early 1979, we connected professionally when I became staff director of the Council of Economic Advisers under Charlie Schultz and Dave was the senior civil servant in the Budget Review Division at OMB.

Dave epitomized public service. He was scrupulous about facts. He performed and demanded high-quality analysis and clear writing. Dave was an economist who wrote for decision makers who were not economists. He knew the difference between a policy preference and analysis. Dave was both a teacher and a mentor for many. He knew that the quality of government depends heavily on people who choose public service, and he took great pride in helping people grow and become the best they could be. When I sent e-mails about his death to some, one consistent theme in the responses was, “he was always generous with his time and his insights.” He taught and mentored without ever making people feel small. For some, Dave was the reason they worked in the budget area, or the reason they worked in the public sector. You get a sense of that when you read the memories people have posted on the dignitymemorial.com site.

Dave was also funny, kind, and fun. He was already at GAO (where “special assistant to the CG” is actually a title that carries a great deal of clout) when I joined the agency to teach policy analysis. I suspect he had something to do with the fact that when I moved online in the SES, I ended up in the budget issues area. Dave was a huge asset as Paul Posner (another now-deceased Fellow) and I were given the mandate to strengthen GAO’s work and recognition in the budget area. As Barbara Bovbjerg (fellow) recalled about the time Dave accompanied her team on a trip to Japan for one study, he “was very smart and very collegial amid his much younger and less-experienced GAO team, and a wonderful traveling companion.” That mirrors another consistent theme when people hear about his death, “he was a great interlocutor and a great friend; I will miss him.”

It seems obvious that his family must have written the official obituary—it appropriately describes the way he saw his calling: it mentions not only his work in the U.S. federal government but also his work on, and pride in, helping other nations. He taught because he cared about creating the same commitment and

ethos about public service in future generations. The obituary also captures his non-budget commitments--especially to civil rights-- and his love of travel. AND it notes his sense of humor. Since it seems silly to repeat what it says, I have pasted it at the end of my tribute.

I can only add a few other personal notes. The first involves Carolyn Mathiasen: Joe and I adopted a baby in 1989. When we first heard about the baby and told the Mathiasens, Carolyn said it was especially wonderful to hear right then because a friend had just died and hearing about a new baby reminded one that life was a circle.

The other two notes are both professional—and quintessential David Mathiasen. He had a maxim that served as a great reminder to analysts that we have chosen a career in which we work very hard but do not necessarily have the final say on many issues: “The right to be heard is not the right to prevail.”

I will end with one I cannot imagine hearing from anyone else: whenever I (and I suspect other women) would vent about a prominent woman not living up to some expectation, he would laughingly remind us “Remember... equality means women can be idiots too.”

The obituary to which I refer can be found at:

<https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/washington-dc/david-mathiasen-9222636>

- Susan Irving, Academy Fellow

Obituary for David Gregory Mathiasen

<https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries/washington-dc/david-mathiasen-9222636>

David G. Mathiasen, 84, died June 13 at his home in Washington, D.C. He had heart ailments. He graduated from Oberlin College and then received a Master of Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton. An economist, he worked for the federal government for 34 years. He began his career at the Bureau of the Budget in the Kennedy administration and then worked for the Agency for International Development in Turkey, India and Pakistan. He was especially proud of his work on the Green Revolution in South Asia. When he returned to the United States in 1972, he went back to the Budget Bureau, which had become the Office of Management and Budget. He was for many years head of OMB's Fiscal Analysis Branch, and then was Deputy Director of the Office of Budget Review. He was very proud of the teams that he nurtured as a manager. In 1998, he took leave from OMB to be executive director of the bipartisan National Economic Commission, which Congress established in an effort to get the federal budget deficit under control, a job he particularly enjoyed but which was scuttled by George H.W. Bush's "no new taxes" pledge. He ended his federal government career as special assistant to the director of the General Accounting Office and then spent two years in Paris at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. After returning to D.C., he taught graduate courses at American University and the University of Maryland; during his OMB years he periodically taught at the at the Yale School of Management. He was married to Carolyn Swisher for 60 years. In addition to their Kalorama apartment, they owned a house in Castine, Maine, where they spent about half the year. In addition to his wife, he is survived by daughters Karen and Jocelyn Mathiasen, daughter-in law Kathryn O'Brien and son-in-law Curt Dawson and four grandchildren. David was a committed, life-long Democrat and enjoyed a close cadre of friends who loved nothing more than a night of political discourse and a gourmet dinner. He was a strong civil rights advocate, hosting Martin Luther King Jr. at Oberlin College and joining the March on Washington in 1963. He was a voracious reader and talented, albeit untidy chef. Having spent several of his pre-college years abroad in Switzerland and London, David was a great travel enthusiast and took enormous pleasure showing his children and grandchildren places that he loved, introducing them to Paris, London, Greece, Tuscany and the Swiss Alps. His own travels later in life took him to Antarctica, Australia, Madagascar and Fiji. He was generous, had a warm sense of humor and told terrible puns, a legacy his daughters are unlikely to carry forward.