Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Zaun remembered as take-charge philanthropist with passion for music, parks

Ralph L. Zaun was never one to sit quietly on the sidelines.

In 1973, when the longtime banker and philanthropist learned the Grafton Village Board planned to tear down the crumbling lime kilns on the community’s south side, he quickly sprang into action.

Besides organizing a committee to save the historic structures, Zaun took a hands-on approach to the effort and spent hundreds of hours tuck-pointing the stonework.

Today, the restored kilns are a centerpiece of one of the village’s most popular parks, along with two other projects he spearheaded — a Pratt truss bridge that was moved from its original Bridge Street location and the Robert P. Zaun Pavilion, a community facility funded largely by a foundation established in his father’s memory.

But Zaun’s legacy as a community leader doesn’t begin and end with Lime Kiln Park. His decades of service included recruiting Milwaukee businesses to relocate to Grafton; helping organize a fund drive to build a municipal swimming pool; arranging for the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra to perform annual concerts in Grafton; holding leadership roles on dozens of civic and business groups as well as the village’s Historic Preservation Commission; and donating money and equipment for scores of school, social and recreational projects.

Grafton lost its most prominent benefactor Thursday, June 3, when Zaun died at Columbia St. Mary’s Ozaukee Hospital in Mequon after a long fight with pulmonary and cardiac illnesses. He was 89.

“Grafton won’t be the same without him,” his wife Edith Zaun said.

“His legacy will be that he loved Grafton and would do whatever he could to help people in the community.”

Zaun was born in Grafton on Dec. 9, 1920, the son of Robert P. and Alma Mintzlaff Zaun.

He graduated from Grafton High School in 1938 and attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison, earning a degree in banking and finance in 1942.

During World War II, he served as a pilot in the U.S. Army Air Corps from 1942 to 1944. He then completed the university’s graduate banking program and attended the Harvard Business School of Financial Management.

A lifelong village resident, Zaun followed in his father’s footsteps by serving for decades as president of Grafton State Bank. The bank was founded in 1906 by a group of investors led by his grandfather, Louis Zaun.

Zaun served in the Wisconsin Assembly from 1947 to 1951, was a past president of the Independent Bankers of America and served on the Ozaukee County Economic Development Corp. More recently, he oversaw the work of the Zaun Memorial Foundation, which was established in 1965.

He married Edith Wilterdink on Feb. 14, 1986, at the Concordia University Chapel in Mequon.

Throughout his many year of community service, Zaun earned a reputation as a strong-minded leader who didn’t hesitate to offer new ideas — and get the ball rolling when no one else would.

“Whenever he saw a way he could make Grafton a better place, he was there,” said Nancy Hundt, executive director of the Grafton Area Chamber of Commerce.

“And whenever he put his name on something, he stuck with it.”

Grafton Village Administrator Darrell Hofland called Zaun “Grafton’s No. 1 booster.”

“He was a great visionary who never stopped thinking of ways to make Grafton the best community possible,” Hofland said.

“To his credit, he was often willing to become financially involved if it meant getting an idea or project off the ground.”

Among his plethora of interests, Zaun’s greatest affinity was for music, his wife said.

“That’s really his lasting legacy,” she said. “He had a lifelong love of music. That’s why he gave a concert grand piano to Grafton High School and a piano to the senior center.

“Ralph was instrumental in arranging to have the Milwaukee Symphony perform at the high school for many years, and he was very proud of that.

“His motto was always, ‘Do good before you do well.’”

Although health problems slowed Zaun in recent years, he refused to curtail his activities, his wife said. He served for 13 years as chairman of the Historic Preservation Commission until stepping down in March, unable to see one of his fondest wishes fulfilled.

“He wanted to establish a museum in Grafton, but he didn’t have enough time,” Mrs. Zaun said.

In addition to his wife, Zaun is survived by three stepchildren, Steven (Frances) Lindstedt of Cudahy, Karen Bach of Cedarburg and Lori (Pat) Kessenich of Manitowish Waters; six grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.

He was preceded in death by his brother Fredric.

A funeral was held Tuesday, June 8, at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Grafton. Interment was at the parish cemetery.

Memorials to St. Paul Lutheran Church, the Ozaukee County Humane Society and Grafton Education Foundation are suggested.

Mueller Funeral Home of Grafton assisted the family.

RALPH ZAUN enjoyed listening to Tina Davis play a concert grand piano he donated to Grafton High School in 2006. Press file photo