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Businessman, philanthropist, father

As leader of the family wine and spirits business, Eddie Phillips believed that financial success was only a mechanism for serving those less fortunate

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Community News Editor

Edward Jay “Eddie” Phillips had an unlikely start to his successful career in business.

“He had studied psychology, child psychology, at Stanford and then received his master’s here in Minnesota, then followed that up with a law degree, and only after that was the proposition made to join the family business,” Phillips’ son, Dean Phillips, told the AJW.

Remembrance

“He was handed the reins at a very early age and without much business training, and he had to figure it out,” Dean Phillips added. “And he figured it out pretty quickly.”

Phillips was the chairman and chief executive officer of Phillips Beverage Company, which began as a wine and spirits wholesaler started by his grandfather, Jay Phillips. Among other accomplishments during his tenure, Phillips launched Millennium Import Company to develop and market luxury spirits — including Belvedere and Chopin vodkas — and established a legacy of giving back.

Phillips died April 8, after a nine-year battle with multiple myeloma. He was 66.

Phillips was the fourth-generation president of the company that was originally founded in 1912 as Ed Phillips and Sons, a wholesaler of candy, newspapers and magazines. Jay Phillips created the liquor wholesale business in 1933, after the 21st Amendment ended Prohibition.

After taking over the family business, Phillips was instrumental in expanding the company to other states and it became the first wine and spirits wholesaler that operated in more than one market.

“Ultimately, he sold the wholesale operations to focus on brand building, which was really his passion and where he added so much value,” said Dean Phillips, who is the CEO of Phillips Distilling Company. “For many years, we were primarily a wholesaler of wines and spirits, and it was he who made the strategic decision to exit that business, which his grandfather, my great-grandfather, had built, instead to focus on creating brands and developing successful products that way.”

And it was that success that allowed Phillips to experience his true joy:

giving back.

“He recognized that a very fine line separates those who succeed and those that don’t, and that it’s an obligation of those who are fortunate to assist those who are less fortunate to pursue their own dreams,” Dean Phillips said. “Success in business can become even more sweet by sharing it.”

Phillips served as a trustee and a member of the executive committee of the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation, which was established by his grandparents in 1944. The foundation is one of the largest in Minnesota and distributed almost \$10 million in 2010.

In late 2004, Phillips established the Edward Phillips Family Foundation to complement the work of the original family foundation.

“If you look at the multitude of his pursuits, it’s really quite extensive,” Dean Phillips said. “Ultimately, it’s focused on the underdog, whether it’s disadvantaged kids in North Minneapolis, which was a particular interest of his, or disadvantaged kids in Ethiopia. He always wanted to give people a chance.”

Among other organizations, Phillips served as chairman and a member of the executive committee of Children’s Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota; was a founding board member of the Page Education Foundation; served on the advisory committee of the Givens Collection of African American Literature at the University of Minnesota; and served as an executive mentor for the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota.

“My father didn’t see religions or colors or socioeconomics as dividers, he saw them as opportunities to unite,” Dean Phillips said. “And that was really his brand.”

After his mother, Pauline Phillips (widely known as Abigail Van Buren — “Dear Abby”), was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease, Phillips engineered a \$10 million donation for research at the Mayo Clinic. And after his own diagnosis, he became a member of the boards of both the Multiple Myeloma Research Foundation and Multiple Myeloma Research Consortium.

He was also an early advocate and

benefactor of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.

Phillips also founded the Jay Phillips Center for Jewish-Christian Learning at St. John’s University and the University of St. Thomas (renamed the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning, in 2006), and served as a member of both its board of directors and executive committee. The center was born when it merged with a similar

program at St. Thomas University that had been started by Richard Cohen’s father.

Cohen and Phillips maintained a friendship for more than 30 years, and Cohen has served on the board of Phillips Beverage Company for 25 years.

“He was just a wonderful human being,” Cohen said. “In terms of the humanitarian side of him, you couldn’t

be with him very long without being encouraged to do better for yourself, but more importantly, to do better for others.”

Rabbi Marcia Zimmerman, senior rabbi of Temple Israel in Minneapolis, referred to Phillips as a “connector” and someone who “got people together to do good in the world.” She said she will miss his wisdom.

“I turned to him a lot for support and for his advice,” Zimmerman said. “I will really miss his ability to see beyond what is to what can be. That was an art that he had. And I’ll also miss his courage, he had incredible courage to do something; whether it was going to be a success or not, he was willing to risk to do something for someone else, and also to make things better.”

Dean Phillips said his father will be remembered for his love of baseball and the Minnesota Twins, his extraordinary sense of humor, which could disarm anyone from children to heads of state, and the love he had for his family.

“People often speak of his business success and his philanthropic success, but his success as a father was perhaps most monumental,” Dean Phillips said. “He was a remarkable father above all else, and that’s a legacy that we are eager and excited to perpetuate.”

Phillips is survived by his children, Hutton, JJ, Dean and Tyler; daughter-in-law, Karin; grandchildren, Daniela and Pia; parents, Pauline and Mort Phillips; sister, Jeanne Phillips (Walter Harris); and many friends.



Edward Phillips