

Liquor tycoon was known for philanthropy

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A gifted businessman who reshaped the Minneapolis liquor business built by his grandfather, Edward J. "Eddie" Phillips also enlarged a family tradition of generous giving.

Phillips, credited with revolutionizing the vodka business, came from a long line of business leaders, philanthropists and media celebrities. His mother, Pauline Phillips, is better known by her former pen name: Abigail Van Buren, or simply "Dear Abby."

Phillips, 66, died Friday of multiple myeloma at his home in Minneapolis, surrounded by his four children.

He had a valuable knack for identifying a category of consumer goods without a luxury brand, then filling that niche, said one of his two adult sons, Dean.

Phillips used that talent with the introduction of Belvedere vodka to the U.S. market in 1996, and more recently with his investment in Talenti Gelato.

But Dean Phillips said that, for his dad, business was a means to an end -- helping the people around him.

Phillips served as a trustee of the foundation his grandparents started, one of Minnesota's largest philanthropies, and also established a second family foundation.

In 2003, not long after his mother's readers learned that she suffered from Alzheimer's, he engineered a \$10 million donation for research into the disease at the Mayo Clinic.

That same year, Phillips was diagnosed with an aggressive form of bone marrow cancer, but he remained elbow-deep in causes he cared about.

Until recently, he was board chairman of Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota, his son said. A lifelong lover of African American music and culture, he supported the Apollo Theater in Harlem, as well as the Worldwide Orphans Foundation.

Born in Eau Claire, Phillips spent much of his childhood in San Francisco, where his mother began writing her advice column for the San Francisco Chronicle.

He graduated from Stanford University and later earned advanced degrees from the University of Minnesota. Phillips' grandfather, Jay, built the liquor distribution giant Ed. Phillips & Sons, and Eddie joined the family business as a young man. Just as he came on, the company became part of a Pennsylvania conglomerate, Alco Standard.

Phillips stayed on with Alco. As head of liquor operations in the 1970s, he launched a national

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advertising campaign that, in a groundbreaking move, encouraged people to drink less. "Enjoy in moderation" was the theme, years before Mothers Against Drunk Driving and other groups raised public awareness of responsible drinking.

Phillips later bought back the family business, but ultimately sold it in chunks. In 1994, he started Millennium Import, which brought Belvedere, a Polish vodka, to the U.S. A companion vodka, Chopin, was soon introduced.

Millennium was sold to Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy in 2005.

Phillips and a business partner have since bought a majority stake in Talenti, which makes luxury frozen desserts, his son Dean said, adding, "He had the magical touch."

Eddie Phillips was equally blessed with "a mosaic of friends, of all colors and backgrounds," his son said.

He deserved them, said one longtime friend and business associate, Pat Fallon. "Every time I've faced hardships in my life, the phone rings or the doorbell rings, and that's Eddie Phillips," Fallon said.

Among Phillips' survivors are his adult sons, Dean and Tyler; daughter-in-law, Karin; son J.J. and daughter Hutton, who are teenaged twins; parents Mort and Pauline; a sister, Jeanne, and two grandchildren. Services will be held at 11 a.m. Monday at Temple Israel, followed by burial at the

Minneapolis Jewish Cemetery.

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