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Remembering Our Friends

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Remembering Our Friends

By

Edward F. Ansello, Ph.D.

Eulogies are often filled with superlatives and absolutes. “He was the most...” or “She never...” These are appropriate to the occasion. Of course, life lived just isn’t like that. We each have our faults, or at least the euphemistic “peccadilloes” or minor sins. Occasionally, if we’re lucky, we encounter people who truly are exceptional, people for whom the superlatives and absolutes are not *pro forma* and not too far from reality. The recent death of our friend Frank Hall, former Delegate in the Virginia General Assembly, church elder, long-term member of our VCoA Advisory Committee, friend to so many, has caused me to reflect on his gifts to others. While doing so, it dawned on me that in three consecutive spring times we have lost men whose caring for others was, indeed, exceptional: Bill Egelhoff in 2013, Benny Lambert in 2014, and Frank Hall in 2015.

William (Bill) Egelhoff preceded me as Director of the Virginia Center on Aging and recruited me as his replacement. He was then, and throughout his long life, a quietly fascinating man, an MBA, Episcopal priest, World War II veteran, entrepreneur, family man, bureaucrat, lifelong learner, outdoorsman, traveler, and low-keyed champion for others. He had an impressive range of experiences that he called upon without boast or pretense, unfolding knowledge and personal connections like compartments in a suitcase. Bill lived a full and meaningful life, touching so many lives with his gentle yet can-do attitude and slowly became a symbol of what a good old age can be.

It wasn't that he was age-less, but age was just not relevant when meeting him. Because of his selflessness, five Virginia Governors sought his counsel by appointing him a member of the Governor's Advisory Board on Aging. Bill helped to inaugurate and to guide the Interfaith Coalition for Older Virginians, as a means to assist clergy and lay leaders to respond to the diverse challenges and opportunities that congregants might face as they grow older. He was concerned with the spiritual as well as the social and economic well-being of older adults.

We write the book of our life one page at a time. Each year, each month, each day is fresh and blank. It's up to us what gets put on these pages. For some, the pages are few, for others there are many pages with little written on them. Bill's book of life was long and full, with many chapters, themes, and characters. Most importantly, his book is a good read. "Amazing" comes to mind

Benjamin (Benny) Lambert lived a life whose days were filled with caring for others, from his loving family to his patients, to his constituents and fellow advocates for others. It ran through more than 50 years as an New England College of Optometry-trained practitioner in Jackson Ward, a champion for almost 30 years in the Virginia House and Senate, consecutively, of people in need, a catalyst for the growth of his beloved alma mater Virginia Union University, and a stakeholder in many other agencies for the betterment of those who were economically or

educationally disadvantaged. He could be counted on for honesty and faced challenges with grace of spirit.

Benny was the first African-American in the 20th century to serve on the Virginia Senate Finance Committee, and also served on the Education and Health, General Laws, General Government, and Health and Human Resources Committees. He used these positions to champion others, not for self-aggrandizement. When our budget was jeopardized despite a record of meaningful work, when the Alzheimer's and Related Diseases Research Award Fund seed grant program was threatened or needed greater funding because of rising laboratory costs, colleagues and I would visit his corner office in the General Assembly building where he'd listen carefully and suggest strategies. He seemed to make time for these conversations, no matter his grueling schedule. He brought these qualities of caring professionalism to such important positions as Secretary of the Board of Trustees of Virginia Union University and member of Virginia Commonwealth University's Health Systems Authority Board. In 1993 he received, deservedly, the Humanitarian Award from the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

Franklin (Frank) Hall's recent death prompted an outpouring of laudatory comments, but whatever and wherever one read an account, it couldn't capture the generosity of spirit and genuine regard that Frank had for older Virginians and issues of aging. Frank, like Benny, served on our Advisory Committee about as long as I've been here at VCoA. (Bill Egelhoff was the common link, for one of Bill's first acts when I succeeded him as Director was to introduce me to members of the General Assembly who both cared about aging issues and older Virginians and would act to do something accordingly.)

We honored Frank and Benny in a special ceremony at the Valentine Museum on the occasion of our Center's 15th anniversary in 1993. Frank and Benny were our "go to" guys in the House and Senate, respectively, whenever we had questions about strategy, funding, outreach, partnerships, promotion. Just about anything. Frank's office, Room 529 in the General Assembly Building, staffed by Nancy Bolio, was welcoming. His face could light up from inside in a way that communicated genuine caring for others.

Frank helped me greatly over the course of two dozen years, always with kindness. He'd say "tell me about it" before offering his careful appraisal. He counseled me through the four Assembly sessions that it took to get the "Caregivers Investment Bill" enrolled, starting as his HB 1519 in 1996 and ending, with the great support of Senator Walter Stosch, in 1999 as S910, the Virginia Caregivers Grant Program. Frank didn't care who got "credit" so long as the need for supporting family caregivers was realized.

Frank had been this way since before our beginning, so to speak. In January 1978 he was a co-patron of House Bill 503 to create the Virginia Center on Aging. VCoA Advisory Committee chairman Bob Schneider and I have a shared perspective on Frank Hall: charming, intelligent, savvy, and wise. But, of course, he was more.

One of the last long conversations that I had with Frank, after last fall's Advisory Committee meeting, was about relationships. Then, as always, he counseled that the only real way to get things done is through relationships. "Build trust, build rapport with members. That's how you help seniors," he said. It applies to the General Assembly and it applies to life.

I hope that people like Bill Egelhoff, Benny Lambert, and Frank Hall are not the last of their kind but that regard for others and for causes beyond “self” thrives in the hearts of elected officials and community leaders here and elsewhere. In fact, I know that there are individuals who fit these criteria, some experienced and some new in their positions. Delegate Ken Plum, the sole still-serving co-patron of House Bill 503 in 1978, has attained seniority in the House, while some younger colleagues share the gift of commitment to others.

We remember the good that Bill, Benny, and Frank did with their lives. May it be an inspiration.