

Richard "Dick" L. Berkley '49 - Passing Statement from family

Richard L. Berkley

November 29, 2023

Beloved family man and city leader, Richard L. (Dick) Berkley passed today. He was 92.

He served as KC's only three-term mayor (1979 to 1991) and leaves a legacy as a leader in business, government, community, and neighborhoods. He helped lay the foundation for the massive wave of community investments in the last 25 years.

His accomplishments as mayor included the city's first half-cent sales tax for capital improvements, bonds for police stations and a communication facility, and bonds for a zoo expansion, a major expansion of Bartle Hall, revitalization of the Quality Hill neighborhood, airport improvements, water line improvements and sewer extensions. The bonds collectively totaled hundreds of millions of dollars and fueled over 700 capital projects which began to clear the extensive backlog of deferred maintenance across the city.

He created the Mayor's task force on food and hunger, drugs and AIDS. He created the KC Jazz Commission and co-originated the KC Ethics Commission. He chaired the Municipal Art Commission and served on the Police Board.

Dick was a graduate of Harvard College (BA) and Harvard Graduate Business School (MBA). He was proud to serve as a second lieutenant in the US Navy before returning to the family business where he was Secretary / Treasurer and Member of the Board of Directors for Tension.

His love for KC knew no bounds. Dick served as our region's best ambassador, championing Kansas City both nationally and globally. Dick was President of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Berkley Riverfront Park was named in his honor for his service to the city.

Dick was known as the mayor for all Kansas Citians. He was never too busy to take a call, help people, or come to an event to share remarks. He always did the right thing, with the utmost personal integrity. When he introduced himself he never used the word mayor. He always shook hands and said, "I'm Dick Berkley."

Dick was proud to be named Kansas Citian of the Year, along with dozens of other meaningful awards and accolades. But what he treasured most was the love of his wife, Sandy, their children, grandchildren, and his entire family.

For years, he was also known as "Kansas City's photographer." When you ran into Dick, you were quite likely to have your picture taken and then receive a signed photograph of those special moments in the mail. He truly cared about everyone he met.

He will be missed.

Other information

Mayor Richard “Dick” L. Berkley ’49

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article282477448.html>

Dick Berkley, Kansas City’s longest-serving mayor who led Hyatt collapse response, dies

Former Kansas City **Mayor Richard L. “Dick” Berkley ’49**, who led Kansas City during the 1980s as the city’s first Jewish mayor and oversaw its response to the fatal Hyatt Regency walkway collapse, died Wednesday. He was 92.

Cousin **Bill Berkley ’74**, president and CEO of Tension Corporation, said the former mayor had been in declining health recently, but the timing of his passing was unexpected.

“He was just a great champion and cheerleader and proponent of all of Kansas City, and I underline the all of Kansas City,” Bill Berkley said. “There was no place in this city that he didn’t go to, if anyone needed him. He was never too busy to take a call or to help someone. He was really a man of the people.”

Berkley, the city’s longest-serving mayor, served three terms in office, from 1979 to 1991. Although the position is officially nonpartisan, Berkley was the last Republican mayor and the first in decades.

Mayor Quinton Lucas called Berkley “a real statesman” in both American and Kansas City politics who was kind and “really dedicated his life to public service.”

U.S. Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, a Democrat who succeeded Berkley as mayor, called him a “dear friend” and iconic leader.

“For 12 years as Mayor, and 10 more on the City Council, Dick Berkley offered the calm, collected, and utterly effective leadership that helped transform Kansas City into the major metropolitan area it is today,” said Cleaver, Kansas City’s first Black mayor.

Longtime friend Anita Gorman, the first woman appointed to the Kansas City Board of Parks and Recreation Commissioners, said Berkley was an “outstanding mayor.”

“He was very bright. Harvard graduate. But he was not a braggart or anything like that,” Gorman said Wednesday, reflecting on Berkley’s time in office. Berkley held a master’s degree in business administration from Harvard University.

“He wanted to make sure that all Kansas Citians did well ... we’ve had good mayors but he was certainly a good one and gracious to everyone.” Berkley was a young executive as his family’s firm, Tension Envelope, and chairman of the Jackson County Republican Party when he entered

elected politics in 1969 by being appointed to fill a vacancy on the City Council. He went onto serve 10 years on the council, and for most of that time he was the mayor pro tem. His 1979 mayoral victory over opponent Bruce R. Watkins, a Black councilman, sparked some bitterness among minority groups, but he went on to build trust across racial lines and frustrated conservatives soon after taking office by appointing Watkins to the city parks board, a key commission. Eventually Berkley would be endorsed by the Black political group Freedom Inc. Berkley's most serious crisis in office came with the collapse of the Hyatt Regency walkway on July 17, 1981. In the collapse and aftermath, 114 people died. At the time, Berkley was throwing a party for 80 friends at his Greenway Terrace home. His wife, Sandy, answered the phone. The Fire Department spoke only of an accident, not carnage. Berkley visited the scene that night and wept the next day at an emergency session of the City Council. He demanded an immediate federal probe into the cause of the collapse – a moment admirers view as one of his best displays of leadership. He angrily asked why evidential debris was hustled away from the scene “in the middle of the night.” Design flaws cast a harsh glare on the Crown Center Redevelopment Corp., headed by some of the most powerful civic leaders in town. Berkley never fully regained their support. Berkley, later recalling the tragedy in the 1990s, said that for the next four or five years “I couldn't walk into the Hyatt without tears coming to my eyes.” Mayor Richard Berkley wiped away a tear during a special meeting of the City Council after he announced the death of John Tvedten Sr., an off-duty fire battalion chief who perished in the collapse of the Hyatt skywalks in 1981. File The Kansas City Star In addition to his wife, Berkley is survived by daughter, Elizabeth Berkley, son, Jon Berkley and three grandchildren. His accomplishments as mayor included the city's first half-cent sales tax for capital improvements, bonds for police stations and a communication facility, and bonds for a zoo expansion, airport improvements, water line improvements and sewer extensions. The bonds collectively totaled hundreds of millions of dollars. During his tenure, offices went up by Union Station, the first Twentieth Century tower and other office buildings were constructed near Country Club Plaza, in addition to the Town Pavilion and other downtown office buildings. “This all ties in with job opportunities,” Berkley once said. Berkley Riverfront Park was named in his honor for his service to the city. During his time in office, he helped create task forces on food and hunger, illegal drugs and AIDS, as well as the Kansas City Jazz Commission. He served as president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and received many awards, including the B'nai B'rith Man of the Year Award, The Kansas City Spirit Award, the Chamber of Commerce's Man of the Year, and the Economic Development Corporation's James C. Denney Spirit Award. Berkley was born Richard Berkowitz in Kansas City on June 29, 1931. His family's envelope business shielded him from the Depression, but his childhood was not idyllic. In one year, when he was 8, his 17-year-old brother died of a fever, his father suffered a heart attack and his parents divorced. In his final months in office, Berkley took hundreds of pictures. He carried an Olympus camera with a built-in flash to capture visiting dignitaries, supporters, even reporters who interviewed him. He often kept them in scrapbooks at home, along with the dozen or so shovels he received at groundbreaking parties. For decades afterwards, the former mayor was famous – some would say infamous – for always having a camera with him and snapping photographs of nearly everyone he met. In the pre-digital age, he would then send prints to the people he photographed, which he'd signed on the back. Berkley was the antithesis of the big-headed, know-it-all politician hoping to get his own face on camera. He was low-key and unpretentious.

As Berkley left office in 1991, The Star's executive editor at the time, Joe McGuff, summed him up this way: "How could a man not regarded as a dynamic mayor be so popular? The answer lies in the Kansas City psyche and the qualities we value in our politicians. In the case of Berkley, he rated at the top of what we might call the human being scale.... "If your neighborhood association was holding a meeting and you wanted the mayor to come, all you had to do was call. If your organization was holding a dinner and you wanted a few words from the mayor, Berkley was almost always available. He might not stay long because there were other dinners and other meetings to attend, but everyone understood. "When Berkley introduced himself he never used the word mayor. He always shook hands and said, 'I'm Dick Berkley.'" That's the side of him that Bill Berkley saw over and over again, beginning with when he volunteered to work for him during that first campaign for mayor. "I would be at a dinner with him and watch someone come up and say, I have a pothole in front of my house and he would dutifully take out a note card and write it down, and sure enough the pothole got fixed."

Correction: A previous version of this story misstated Bill Berkley's relationship to Richard Berkley. They are cousins.

The Star's Daniel Desrochers, Bill Lukitsch, Rick Montgomery and Yael Abouhalkah contributed reporting This story was originally published November 29, 2023, 3:13 PM. JONATHAN SHORMAN 913-735-3689 Jonathan Shorman is The Kansas City Star's lead political reporter, covering Kansas and Missouri politics and government. He previously covered the Kansas Statehouse for The Star and Wichita Eagle. He holds a journalism degree from The University of Kansas. Read more at:

<https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/article282477448.html#storylink=cpy>

Other articles / references / links about Richard L. Berkeley '49:

- **Pembroke Country Day School Information**
 - [Per PCD 1949 Yearbook](#)
 - Attended 6 ½ years
 - Baseball 1,2,3,4
 - Lettermen's Club 2,3,4,
 - Speech Club 2
 - Stage Crew 3
 - Hilltop Staff 4
 - Time Test 1
 - Class President 4 (President Senior Class of 1949)
 - Former Trustee (PCD: 1976 - 1979)
 - Honored with the Distinguished Alumni Award in 2009
- [Richard "Dick" L. Berkley '49 Passing Statement](#)

- [KCUR: Richard L. Berkley '49](#)
- [Wikipedia: Richard L. Berkley '49](#)
- [Wikipedia: Pembroke Hill School - Lists Richard L. Berkley Class of 1949](#)
- [Kansas Chamber of Commerce - Kansas Citian of the Year Richard L. Berkeley in 1994](#)

<https://cleaver.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/congressman-cleavers-statement-passing-mayor-richard-berkley>

<https://www.kshb.com/news/local-news/richard-berkley-kansas-city-missouris-longest-serving-mayor-dies-at-92>