

Beloved administrator Bill Malone dies at 77

Former schools chief, Everglades dealmaker earned acclaim as savvy manager, master negotiator

By Andrew Marra
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Bill Malone, a public administrator who oversaw the purchase of tens of thousands of acres for Everglades restoration and the construction



Malone

of dozens of schools before capping his career with a stint as Palm Beach County's schools superintendent, died last week at 77.

The cause of death was complications from Alzheimer's disease, his family said.

Plain-spoken and

even-keeled, Malone spent 18 years as a high-level executive at two of the region's most vital and largest government agencies: the South Florida Water Management District and the Palm Beach County School District.

He played a central role in countless public efforts to protect the county's water supply, reshape and rebuild the county's schools and secure huge swaths

of land for Everglades conservation.

Called out of retirement in 2011 to serve as the county's interim schools superintendent, he calmed a tumultuous district rife with raw feelings over the ouster of its longtime leader.

Wherever Malone worked, it seemed, he attracted widespread praise, winning

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frequent acclaim for his management style, negotiating skills and calming influence.

Environmental icon Nathaniel Reed dubbed him "the most trusted man in the [water management] district." The Palm Beach Post Editorial Board hailed him as the School District's "master builder."

When he stepped down as superintendent in 2011, the School Board's chairman mounted a Malone quote — "Focus on the prize" — on a plaque in the board meeting room as tribute.

His largest singular accomplishment may have been overseeing the Water Management District's purchase of 62,000 acres in Palm Beach and Hendry counties from Talisman Sugar Corp. to preserve it for Everglades restoration efforts.

When it was completed in 1999, the \$152 million transaction was the largest single land deal in the long-standing state and federal efforts to rejuvenate the Everglades. It was championed by Vice President Al Gore and cited by Gov. Jeb Bush as one of his administration's major achievements.

The Georgia native studied civil engineering at Vanderbilt University and served in the Army during the Vietnam War, where he earned two Bronze Stars for exemplary service.

After working in water resource management for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, he moved to Palm



Kristen Rulison was named Palm Beach County Teacher of the Year in March 2011 in her classroom at Elbridge Gale Elementary School. At left is interim Superintendent Bill Malone; at right is Tommy Rulison, Kristen's husband and fellow teacher. [LANNIS WATERS/PALMBEACHPOST.COM FILE]

Beach County in the late 1980s to take a job with the WMD, where he served as land management director and deputy executive director.

He oversaw the purchase of tens of thousands of acres of land for Everglades restoration efforts and other water-conservation projects, including the Talisman deal.

A dealmaker with a diplomatic touch, he brokered the often grueling negotiations between district managers and landowners.

Ousted by Bush administration

Yet the high regard of colleagues and his supervisor were not enough to save his job when he ran afoul of Bush's administration.

In 2000, a year after completing the Talisman transaction, Bush officials ousted him over suspicions that he had privately criticized another high-profile land deal.

The move prompted a district board member to lament that Malone was "pushed out by people in Jeb Bush's administration who are very happy to take credit for what he has achieved."

Undaunted, Malone urged district employees in a farewell message not to be cowed into silence by political currents.

"Some of you will now fear for your futures," he wrote. "Whatever you do, you must not back off, you must not become docile and compliant bureaucrats."

He was soon hired on by the School District, brought on as facilities director and quickly promoted to chief operating officer.

He oversaw the building and remodeling of dozens of schools in a three-year stint in district administration, all of them reportedly completed on schedule and many without a single change order.

"If we could do the same with our academics, we'd be

then-chairman quipped of Malone's performance.

Malone left the public sector in 2003 for a job at an architectural firm, a move he confessed to a reporter felt "a little selfish" after a career in public service.

Retirement beckoned a few years later when he and his wife, Kathy, moved to Alachua County. He volunteered and helped to found a private Christian school.

Brought peace back to schools

The call to public service sounded again when longtime Schools Superintendent Art Johnson was ousted by the board in 2011 after months of political tumult.

Seeking a steward with a calming touch, board members turned to Malone, who moved in with his mother-in-law in Hobe Sound to take the helm of the county's largest employer.

An engineer by training, Malone had no experience as an educator.

But after a long career in high-level government jobs, it was the 68-year-old's first time in a chief executive role — one that his wife said he plainly relished.

He would rise before 5 a.m. each day for the long commute to Palm Springs, vowing to personally answer every email message he received, Kathy Malone recalled.

"He was totally dedicated to that job," she said. "He just thought it was a great opportunity to serve the children."

Malone stayed on just nine months before heart problems prompted him into retirement once more. As he

for his thoughtfulness and demeanor.

"We desperately needed someone who could calm the waters and bring peace back to the district," School Board Chairman Frank Barbieri told him at a farewell ceremony. "That someone, it turns out, was you."

The last decade of his life was dedicated to family and nurturing his longtime passion for golf. He and his wife traveled frequently and moved to Tennessee to be closer to family.

He was diagnosed with Alzheimer's last year, his wife said, but his adeptness with coping mechanisms shielded the extent of its progress until his condition worsened in recent months.

Even after being moved to a hospice facility outside Nashville, he continued to recognize his wife and tell her he loved her. He died May 3.

He is survived by his wife; sister Michelle Adair Malone; brother-in-law Gilbert Randal Cavanaugh; mother-in-law Jerry Lynn Cavanaugh; son William Frank Malone Jr. and wife Kourtney Malone; son Ryan Gilbert Malone; and daughter Juanita Elizabeth Malone; three grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

His ashes will be interred at the Middle Tennessee Veterans Cemetery in Nashville. A celebration of life ceremony will be scheduled in West Palm Beach once social distancing requirements have been loosened.

For details about memorial contributions or later ceremonies, visit williamfmalone.org.

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