



Gilbert Waters

January 4, 2018

A "Celebration of Life" for Gilbert Waters, the last living member of this area's 10 Most Influential Businessmen of the 20th Century, will be held January 31, 2018 from 5:30-7:30 at Michael's on East.

Mr. Waters is survived by his Austrian-born wife, Elisabeth, as well as children, Chris, Robin and Michael and stepchildren Iris Schaerf, Simon Schaerf, Boris Schaerf and grandchildren Erin Waters, Mattie Cofield, Jessie Waters and Hannah Brook McCloud; three step grandchildren and eight great grandchildren. He was married to Elizabeth Boylston, an architect, in May 1951 and divorced in 1981. She preceded Mr. Waters in death.

Elisabeth Waters, his wife of nearly 20 years, said Gilbert died peacefully after four years of suffering with the progressive brain disorder known as Lewy Body Dementia.

It was a quiet end to decades of a variety of personal successes and more than an equal number of projects that benefited the public. Harris Williams, a friend for more than 50 years, likened Waters to the man whose name is synonymous with Sarasota. When asked who he had in mind, Williams replied, "the museum carries his name, as does the bridge that my friend fought so hard to make it the beauty it is today." Differences aside, Williams said Waters worked for Sarasota as hard as John Ringling and made as many

lasting contributions.

'Gilbert Was One Of A Kind'

"Gilbert was one of a kind, a very special man," Mrs. Waters said. "His mind was always focused on the needs people have. Everything he did was not for making him rich or making him famous; he was always thinking about people and what they need."

Waters' life from 1960 until the turn of the century didn't include memberships in civic clubs nor did he win any awards as the perfect husband or father. The Yale Club and in later years, the Brain Trust, Long View Society and the Tiger Bay Club, were his exceptions. All are made up mostly of professional men and women who gather regularly to talk politics and past, present and future of all things Sarasota.

Gil's time in the Navy carried over to his civilian life. At one time or another he had yachts large enough to accommodate friends comfortably. He and Elisabeth spent many weekends on the water, just the two of them. It was their escape from the spotlight of success. Elisabeth was in the Captain's seat occasionally as her husband was daydreaming about his next project, or plotting against those who opposed whatever he had on his mind. He once said, "I don't mind if they are against a program because they don't think it's good for the people, but unfortunately most of the time, it's personal. You know what I say to that?"

During construction the two of them took to their canoes to make visual checks on the progress of the "Bridge Too High" and for updates from the job superintendent.

The Waters children have lived out of state for years but remained in touch. In

1994 the father formed a limited partnership with them. The first project was a wooded tract of land in south Manatee County that Gil turned into 115 affordable homes named Arbor Creek. There is no record of any subsequent projects.

Elisabeth and Gil were almost inseparable after their marriage. At home they became active philanthropists and were fixtures at galas benefiting the area's not-for-profit cultural, educational and social service organization.

48 Hours A Day Together

"We were only married 20 years, but we spent 48 hours with each other every day," Mrs. Waters said. Gil was a man in hurry when he arrived in Sarasota, and his desire to accomplish more, quicker and better, stayed with him until his death.

However, left unfinished is "Sky Plaza," a pedestrian overpass at Main Street and U.S Highway 41 that could make the Bayfront more accessible. This is only a part of Gil's plan to resurrect an Eisenhower-era downtown revitalization project he insisted would guide Sarasota into the 21st Century.

Even amid the scars of shattered Europe immediately following World War II, Gil Waters was charmed by the architecture and the public squares, the relaxed aesthetic of sidewalk cafes and shops sequestered from the pressures of vehicular traffic.

Maybe it was because his father never learned to drive, or because Waters did not get a driver's license himself until he graduated college. Either way, the Navy veteran got his fill of ideas when he toured France and eastern Europe and since.

Waters was so charmed by sidewalk cafes and other privileges pedestrians enjoy as he traveled abroad after World War II and continued to spend time in Europe. Elisabeth is a native of Vienna, Austria. Until Gil's illness, the couple traveled abroad extensively and maintained a studio apartment in Vienna. Called "Sarasota Vision," Waters' initiative would turn lower Main Street into a full-time pedestrian mall and reconnect downtown to the Bayfront with the walkway arching across U.S. 41. His improbable Ringling Bridge success had him pumped with confidence, but his death may mean end to his last big crusad.

A Look into The Future—In 1959

Visitors to this futuristic 1959 version of Sarasota would use deck parking at Palm Avenue and Whole Foods, surface parking at City Hall and State Street. A fleet of privately operated golf carts — relying solely on donations from fares — would ferry visitors from Orange to Gulfstream at 10-minute intervals.

Main Street would be a stage, not only for eclectic vendors and expanded storefront shopping and dining, but for performers and artists. It would funnel pedestrian traffic to the centerpiece of the renaissance — the crossover bridge to the bay.

"For any city embracing modernization, the first thing you do is embrace your waterfront, to bring people to the water," says Rich Swier Jr., a Sarasota entrepreneur and plan booster. "It's not easy to get there now. Crossing 41 is daunting."

Rising 18 feet above busy four-lane Tamiami Trail before sloping into Marina Jack and Bayfront Park, the pedestrian bridge would be 15 to 20 feet wide, and erected atop a new roundabout that would replace the Main Street stoplight at U.S. 41.

"This is not just an overpass," says Sarasota architect Brent Parker as he sweeps a finger across an illustration. "This is a viewing platform, just like the bridge, that gives everybody a birds-eye view of this vibrant downtown center. You make it desirable. You walk the path as much for the experience as going from A to B."

Golden Gate Example

In 2011, Waters approached Parker, a fellow resident of Golden Gate Point, about resuscitating the 1959 plan. Parker was on the same page, especially when it came to replacing asphalt thoroughfares with permeable brick.

"Bricks on the street change the scale and make pedestrians feel like they own it and have as much right to be there as a car does," Parker says.

"There's also federal grant money available for it."

Today, Parker is the director of Waters' Sarasota Vision. He says bringing closure to the 1959 plan can happen for "under \$7 million."

Five years ago, shortly before taking his annual vacation to Vienna with Elisabeth, Waters huddled with Sarasota's Downtown Improvement District. He told them about his nonprofit Sarasota Vision, Inc., that had secured roughly \$200,000 in private money dedicated to completing the 1959 plan. Waters pitched the U.S. 41 pedestrian overpass bridge and a walkable lower Main Street "morning, noon and night."

"The last of these two projects," he promised, "will make the jackpot ring and it will keep ringing on forever."

When it was over, Waters told them, without apparent sarcasm or irony, "I'm thrilled."

Main Street will not get the bricks, at least not for now. The bricking has been done for areas near the sidewalk but not the road. In other words, a pedestrian mall is not in the immediate future for Main Street, which stays

Tribute Wall



“ *With deep sorrow at the passing of a great man Gil Waters will be sorely missed.*

Janice Peterson Radder

David Peterson

Jeffrey Peterson

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