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Remembering Bill Noriega: A Legacy of Service Above Self

When Bill Noriega opened Bill's Prescription Center on South Parsons Avenue in 1956, it was the area's second pharmacy and only the 18th Brandon business in operation. There were no banks and only two restaurants in town.

During an interview in the early 90's, Bill recalled that it also was when doctors made house calls, office visits were \$4. "And I'd fill prescriptions for a bushel of peppers, or a chicken and some eggs. We certainly knew something about commerce; we knew it all hinged on trust and service," he said.

"I'd like to think I've never refused a person in need, and that we've run this business under the code my father taught me: 'Be honest.' So whenever I've put my key in my door, I haven't considered how much money I can make, but how much service I can give."

For half a century, Bill Noriega operated his business and lived his life being true to his father's code of honor and his own passion for service above self.

"Bill was a nobleman."

Among the countless people whose lives he touched is Bob McLean, president of J.E. McLean & Sons and chairman of Valrico State Bank's board of directors. He recalls meeting Bill Noriega in 1956.

"It was immediately evident to me that he was a man of sterling character and strong conviction. Over the years we were able to cement a bond of friendship which I, at least, value to the utmost.

"Bill was a nobleman, not by birth or by wealth, but by his life of humility, grace and generosity.

He was very concerned, as was Caesar's wife, that he bring no occasion of reproach upon himself, his family or his associates.

"Although he was a man of firm convictions, he asserted his views in a meek and humble manner. He was a person who approached every situation with great consideration, beginning with his touchstone, 'is this the proper thing to do?'"

"The accounts of his generosity are legion. You could never do more for Bill than he did for you. I believe I am on the mark when I say that some people, who could not pay for medicine, lived because he provided, without cost, what was needed at the time."

"There's no more like Bill; they threw away the mold."

Area resident Jerry Clemons talked of the deeds that attest to McLean's words. "Bill gave and gave and expected nothing in return. When our daughter was born back in 1963, money was very tight," he explained. "Bill knew about our situation and he kept us supplied with all the medicines we needed; waited until tax return time for payment. I always paid, but he never asked.

"When I mentioned I had a friend who was feeling under the weather, he said, 'I've got a cure for that.' Then he made fresh chicken soup and took it to her. His generosity and his love for people was from the heart.

"He called me Big Jerry. There's no more like Bill; they threw away the mold. I'll always miss him."

"Bill did not believe in the need for monuments. He felt that only those who don't need monuments

of life not necessarily as unwanted hazards, but as opportunities to earn his self-respect. Bill did not believe in the

need for monuments. He felt that only those who don't need monuments deserve them."

"I'd be willing to bet he's given away as much money as he ever made in that pharmacy."

Hillsborough County Sheriff David Gee has known Bill Noriega for a lifetime. "My mother used to take me into the pharmacy when I was a baby," he explained.

"At every level, Bill was one of the most generous, giving people I've ever met. He'd hear about tragic cases the sheriff's office was involved in and volunteer to help. I'd be willing to bet he's given away as much money as he ever made in that pharmacy."

Valrico State Bank board member and rancher Dennis Carlton agrees. "I've known Bill since the mid-80's; he was always a humble man, helping in the community with a servant's heart. We should all strive to emulate him."

"Bill was all about service. He had an unusual instinct for it."

Insurance agency owner Chuck Jennings first met Bill Noriega in 1987. "A small group of us gathered in a dining room in Bob McLean's house to discuss the idea of a community bank," he recalls.



Bill Noriega dispensed medicine and "wise advice."

"From the start, Bill was clearly all about service. He had an unusual instinct for it which influenced far beyond the bank's service mission.

"It's why people who have moved from the community still entrust their pharmacy needs to Bill's Prescription Center. Like the person who lives in Zephyrhills now but passes 30 or so pharmacies to get to Bill's.

"He had the gift of quiet humility and a real passion for things that mattered to him. He looked for ways to improve lives then acted on them. When Bill spoke, you listened very closely, and you learned."

"His quiet counsel was always wise."

Fellow bank board member Leroy English recalls knowing Bill Noriega "by presence" for 16 years, and serving 14 of them on the bank board with him.

"No matter what the situation or place, Bill appeared to be just an ordinary man. He was reserved and shy; never outspoken.

All of us on the board had input and when our opinions differed, his quiet counsel was always wise and we all need to do the same.

"His influence will benefit endless generations."

"...I don't consider how much money I can make, but how much service I can give."

—Justo "Bill" Noriega, Jr.



Among them is Dr. Greg Henderson, leading ophthalmologist and long-time family friend.

"His caring demeanor helped me and many others to pursue careers in medicine."

Henderson recalls being a young boy ordering soft drinks at the soda counter of Bill's Prescription Center. "Mr Bill" always took time to patiently repeat instructions to his patrons and listen to their concerns, he said.

"His caring demeanor helped me and many others to pursue careers in medicine. His influence is priceless and endless; it will outlive all of us who are left to remember him."

"His is the legacy a man wants to leave."

"It's hard not to be repetitive," said Jerry Ball, president and CEO of Valrico State Bank, "There are so many amazing tributes and articles about Bill Noriega.

"Throughout the 17 years I knew him, he gave and expected honesty, honor and loyalty. But service before self was his pulpit; he proved his belief that a person who lived that philosophy would never fail in life.

"Bill once explained that his dad was not formally educated, but he was so proud of him. He shared memories of riding with him in his ice delivery truck. 'My father taught me a lot about how to be a man,' Bill said. 'Be respectful. Be punctual. Listen.'"

"His is the legacy a man wants to

Fondly known as "Bill's Pills," the original pharmacy was at the southwest corner of Parsons Avenue and State Road 60.



1959 file photo from the Tampa Tribune archives.

leave; he was my mentor. If there were grades in a life lived, Bill Noriega's would be 12 out of 10."

Among other things, Bill Noriega's punctuality is recalled by Beth Bravis. "I am the youngest in our (McLean) family and I do regret not getting to know Mr. Noriega until much later. Their memories of him are so priceless.

"But I do treasure the ones I've gathered, especially here at the bank where I'm in attendance for board meetings. I'll remember that 'Mr. Bill' was always punctual, a reflection of his respect for others. And I'll never forget his gentle, soft-spoken manner that camouflaged such wisdom. He didn't speak often, but got everyone's full attention when he did. I'll always miss his precious, pearly words of wisdom."

His pharmacy moved and grew and

became state-of-the-art. "But Bill Noriega's customer care was always state-of-the-heart and he spent his life administering to the needs of others," said Todd. "Bill improved and enriched the lives of many, including mine."

"Bill is the guy we should all want to measure up to," said longtime friend LeVaughan Amerson. "The kind of person you want as a friend. He can be appropriately judged as one of those rare breeds of men: a true humanitarian. He certainly is in my book."

"He found the positive in every person."

"Bill was unique; a successful business man who was truly caring, gentle and giving," said Don Weaver. He has known Bill personally for more than 30 years and worked with him for 10 at the bank where he is its chief loan officer.

"Bill was one of the nicest, kindest individuals I've ever known. In 30 years, I never heard him speak an ill word of anyone; he found the positive in every person and situation.

"Bill lived his unshakable belief in service to his fellow man; I regard my association with him as a treasured gift."

"Just call me Bill."

"I am a Valrico State Bank employee but 'Just call me Bill,' Mr. Noriega always insisted," remembers Sandy Mortellaro.

"I've known him since the bank opened in 1989 and attended to the (Noriega) family's banking affairs here.

He always made me feel like a close and valued friend; the kindest, gentlest, most respectful person I've ever known; the gold standard."

"He had a special affection for race horses."

"Mr. Noriega and I shared a love for horses. He had a special affection for race horses and kept registered thoroughbreds," revealed Jerry Ball's assistant, Judy Hamblin.

"He jested with me once that if common sense and his father's guidance hadn't prevailed, he may even have become a jockey! 'I had the right weight and height,' he said.

"He was a prince among men. Bill Noriega walked the walk and left indelible

human goodness is considerably diminished by his passing."

A TRIBUTE TO
BILL NORIEGA
*Our Cherished Friend and
Valued Colleague*
From the Directors and Staff of
Valrico State Bank