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TOPICAL ALERT TOP STORY

OBITUARY | JIM BURGESS, 85

Jim Burgess, former Wisconsin State Journal publisher, dead at 85

Samara Kalk Derby | Wisconsin State Journal

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L. ROGER TURNER

Samara Kalk Derby | Wisconsin State Journal

Former Wisconsin State Journal publisher Jim Burgess, who led the paper from 1984 to 1993, died Monday after suffering cardiac arrest while walking his dog Friday night near the Downtown Madison condo he and his wife owned. He was 85.

Monday was also the couple's 63rd wedding anniversary. "It's kind of poignant," his wife, Cathie Burgess, said.

Burgess suffered the cardiac arrest while walking Blue, the couple's 3-year-old German wirehaired pointer, Cathie said.

The couple's son Peter Burgess said as his father aged and became more limited in his activities, the couple's dog became the center of his life.

"Taking care of him and walking him and feeding him and the simple things, that was his structure," he said.

The devotion went both ways, Cathie Burgess said. When a police officer found her husband lying on the sidewalk, Blue was sitting next to him, she said. "It's quite a picture."

In addition to his service to the State Journal, Burgess served on numerous community boards and was an avid outdoorsman, with a home near Portage on Neenah Creek and another in Big Sky, Montana. The couple was planning to leave Sunday for Montana, Cathie Burgess said.



Jim Burgess, surrounded by family, from left: Kary Deuel, Peter Burgess, Cathie Burgess, Curtis Burgess and Sydney Burgess.

BURGESS FAMILY PHOTO

In 2008, long after he had left the newspaper, Burgess was inducted into the Wisconsin Newspaper Hall of Fame, along with two other publishers.

“They’re more than just publishers,” Peter Fox, then executive director of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association, said at the time. “These are people who left behind a legacy of discernible contributions and improvements to the craft of journalism.”

Long career in Lee

Before becoming publisher at the State Journal, Burgess, like his father and grandfather, was a publisher of his hometown paper, the La Crosse Tribune.

His 30-year journalism career was entirely within Lee Enterprises, which publishes 77 daily newspapers in 26 states. Lee is co-owner of Madison Media Partners, which publishes the Wisconsin State Journal.

Before graduating from the UW-Madison School of Journalism in 1958, Burgess was business manager of the student newspaper, The Daily Cardinal.

He worked as a reporter for the State Journal and was a staff member of newspapers in Missoula, Montana; Minneapolis; and Davenport, Iowa, before beginning his career as a publisher, which included stints at the Missoulian in Missoula, and the Independent Register in Helena, Montana.

While State Journal publisher, he also acted as Lee executive vice president.

Burgess was a proponent of the Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired Monona Terrace and backed the convention center not only in his role as publisher but also by giving his personal time to center committees. He was also a member of then-Gov. Tommy Thompson's Blue Ribbon Task Force on Gambling in 1991 and 1992.

In 1995, Burgess was chair of the state Study of Administrative Value and Efficiency (SAVE) Commission.



Jim Burgess, right, in a photo from 1995, when he served as chairman of the Study of Administrative Value and Efficiency (SAVE) Commission. At left are former Gov. Tommy Thompson and then-Administration Secretary James Klauser.

STATE JOURNAL ARCHIVES

He was a former member of the Associated Press board of directors and a former chair and president of the Inland Daily Press Association. He was a former vice president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association and received the 1992 Inland Daily Press Association Distinguished Service Award.

Burgess also served as a chair of the Greater Madison Chamber of Commerce and as a trustee of Edgewood College. He had been on the boards of Meriter Hospital, the UW Medical Foundation, the former Madison Art Center (now the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art) and the Overture Center.

Center for Ethics

Peter Burgess, a philosophy professor at the University of Paris, said after his father left the State Journal, he took an even more active role in the Madison community, and in liberal arts and human sciences.

In 2008, Burgess helped establish the Center for Journalism Ethics in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at UW-Madison.

UW-Madison associate professor Katy Culver, the James E. Burgess chair in journalism ethics and director of the center, remembered Burgess as dedicated to integrity and ethics in a letter to members of its advisory board Tuesday.

“His was the vision that launched the Center and the impact that we have today,” Culver wrote. “He always said he thought the University of Wisconsin-Madison was the ideal place for such an effort, and I know to my core that he was right.”

Culver said Burgess urged her “to dream big” and said she will miss their straight-talking conversations. “Neither of us ever liked to flower up the language or talk around tough issues, rather than about them.”

Frank Denton was at the Detroit Free Press in 1986 when Burgess hired him to become editor of the State Journal, a role Denton held until 2004.

Denton said his best Burgess story comes from the 1990s, when the paper was covering a United States Senate campaign and got a tip that a candidate had illegally manipulated some of his investment holdings.

As the paper started to investigate, the candidate’s lawyer threatened to sue, Denton said. “We really didn’t need a lawsuit, but I talked to Jim, and Jim became very agitated” and had the paper continue the investigation. The candidate never sued, but Denton still remembers Burgess’ outrage.

“He was a man of high integrity, understanding and respect for the importance of journalism, and a very smart guy,” Denton said.

Peter said his father's turning point came in 1983, just before he became State Journal publisher. "He metamorphized and became a different kind of father and a different kind of husband. I think much more soft and much more interested in art and ideas and a little bit less stressed."

Daughter Sydney Burgess, a high school counselor in Charlotte, North Carolina, said her favorite memories of her father are of him cheating at tennis by telling distracting stories, and trying to picnic on a sailboat going downwind.

He was an "active outdoorsman forever," she said, and "would rather chop down a tree than maybe read a book on the couch."

Burgess is further survived by two other children, Curtis, of Madison, and Kary Deuel, who lives near Asheville, North Carolina. He had 11 grandchildren.

Cathie Burgess said a service won't be held until spring or early summer because of COVID-19 and the holidays.

Photos: November 2021 Photos of the Month