



Neil L Dillard

March 25, 1929 - April 24, 2021

Former Carbondale Mayor Neil Dillard died in Carbondale Memorial Hospital on April 24 at the age of 92. The depth, breadth and length of Neil's service to Carbondale and his native Southern Illinois will be celebrated with a public gathering at the Carbondale Civic Center on Sunday, May 23, 2021 at 2pm.

Neil was a local boy made good, and he became a good man who always gave his best and looked for the best in others. He grew up on the outskirts of West Frankfort, where his dad was a coal miner and his parents owned and operated a grocery store. Neil met his future wife, Mary Ellen Donahue, at a junior high school basketball game. Mary Ellen was his only girlfriend; they were married for 63 years.

Neil was a standout student and athlete at Frankfort Community High School, receiving an all-state honorable mention in football, and was recruited to play at McKendree College. He juggled playing sports with helping in his parents' grocery store, delivering morning newspapers and ice, and building a house for the family with his dad, a self-taught carpenter.

Neil worked his way through college, graduating from Southern Illinois University (SIU) in 1951. He was then drafted by the US Army, and served as a cryptographer in Heidelberg, Germany, during the Korean War. Initially planning a career in the private sector, Neil became a salesperson for Texaco Oil in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Returning to Southern Illinois for a master's degree in business at SIU, Neil decided to take on an administrative role with the university, then under the leadership of visionary President Delyte W. Morris.

Neil and Mary Ellen moved to Carbondale in 1964, and Mary Ellen became an eighth-grade teacher as the Carbondale public school system was desegregating. They immediately appreciated the diversity of Carbondale and SIU, and became actively involved within their respective careers in advancing inclusivity for residents and students. Neil went on to hold a succession of posts at SIU in auxiliary enterprises, institutional research and studies and economic development during a period that coincided with the university's rapid physical growth and peak enrollment.

He and Mary Ellen deeply invested themselves in the health of the community and university for over fifty years. They received numerous individual honors and were jointly honored by the Carbondale Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club of Carbondale for their substantial and consistent contributions to civic life.

Neil served on the Carbondale City Council for six years, then was elected mayor for four consecutive terms (16 years), making him the longest-serving mayor in Carbondale history. He never missed a city council meeting (457 of them), as mayor between 1987 and 2003.

Neil was a true servant leader, dedicated to the common good and crediting others for the many accomplishments during his time in office, including redevelopment and renewal of the University Mall, construction of the Carbondale Civic Center/City Hall, renovation of the historic railroad depot, development of the Town Square Pavilion, construction of a state-of-the-art water plant and improvements to both wastewater treatment plants.

Neil set a high standard for town-gown and intergovernmental relationships, including responsibility for the creation of CCU (city, chamber and university) meetings, establishment of an annual city council meeting on the SIU campus, and active solicitation of students for city boards and commissions. Neil was committed to building partnerships with other governmental units to benefit the city, including cooperating with Carbondale Community High School District 65 on financing of a new high school, and joining Carbondale Elementary School District 95 and the Carbondale Park District on the development of the Superblock.

Neil was dedicated 24/7 to Carbondale. He maintained a listed home phone number — taking calls from residents at all hours — and often heard their concerns while working in his yard, grocery shopping at Schnucks or attending a concert or theatre performance with Mary Ellen. He selflessly represented and promoted Carbondale as a board member and former president of the Illinois Municipal League, board member of the National League of Cities (NLC), and founding member of the NLC's Small Cities Council and University Communities Caucus. He was past president of the Southern Illinois Mayors Association and a founding member of the Carbondale Business Development Corporation and Jackson County Business Development Corporation. In addition, he helped to launch a coal mining museum and to restore an historic family cemetery in Herrin.

Neil was a longtime fan of Saluki basketball, especially during the Rich Herrin era, and was named to the Illinois Basketball Coaches Hall of Fame as a friend of basketball.

According to former Coach Herrin, Neil was known to clear ice and snow off coaches' and players' cars while he waited for the team to arrive at the airport following away games.

After retirement, Neil developed a passion for golf, playing regularly with an experienced senior group at the Carbondale Park District's Hickory Ridge Golf Course. He joined these fine men for coffee, lunch and dinner — even for bingo — for many years. He was affectionately called “Down the Middle Dillard”, because his unusual swing often resulted in balls hit straight down the middle of the fairway.

Neil was his genuine self in any setting, and his word was his bond. If he was to be somewhere, he was there — always early. Neil quietly observed when help might be needed in a situation — whether a good word, a full gas tank or grape sorting in a vineyard at the crack of dawn — and he made himself useful, without fanfare.

Neil is survived by his daughter, Tracy Dillard, and her longtime partner, Todd Dietterle, Cobden and Chicago, IL; granddaughters Leah Dietterle (Kelly Biscuso), Brooklyn, NY and Laurel Dietterle, Chicago, IL; grandson Luke Dietterle (Katie Molitor), Columbia, MO; granddog, Rainey, Cobden, IL; great-granddaughter Isabelle Biscuso, Brooklyn, NY; sister-in-law Ann Dillard, Carbondale, IL; niece Sue Irvin (Kenny), Benton, IL; nephews Dick Donahue (Donna), Decatur, IL; Jim Donahue (Barbara), Highland, IL; David Donahue (Veronica), Manassas, VA; Doug Dillard, Evansville, IN; Brad Dillard (Kathy), Carterville, IL; Steve Collins (Calli Holaway), Monument, CO; Kevin Collins (Jana Schrimsher Collins), Brentwood, TN; Jeff Collins (Brian Beach), Athens, AL. Neil was preceded in death by his parents, Burlis and Tom Dillard; wife, Mary Ellen Dillard; sister, Barbara Collins; brother, Dale Dillard; nephew, Wes Dillard; and granddogs, Feliz and Annie.

In lieu of flowers, gifts in honor of Neil may be made to two organizations with which he and Mary Ellen were integrally involved: Carbondale Community Arts and Southern Illinois Music Festival. Checks should be made payable to “Carbondale Community Arts,” with “Neil and Mary Ellen Dillard Fund” in the memo line; or “SIU Foundation” with “SIFest-Dillard Memorial” in the memo line. All checks may be mailed to the Dillard home at 500 South Oakland, Carbondale, IL 62901.

Crain Pleasant Grove-Murdale Funeral Home assisted the family with arrangements.

Tribute Wall



“ Neil L Dillard

October 23, 2023 at 06:26 AM



“ Hi Tracy.

Our smiles & respect are with you. Neil, like Mary Ellen, was a wonderful, kind, and generous next door neighbor. Mary Ellen was “cookie lady” to our son Benjamin from birth to six when we moved. We watched Neil solve his drainage problem & our leaf racking neglect.

Remember when Neil planted azaleas on south-side of your driveway? We were right next door with huge trees & Southern, Illinois winds blowing our leaves on to your azaleas into your driveway through our well painted white fence. We admired the azaleas. We did not notice our leaves on their side of our fence. We only racked once a season-busy dumb young parents.

We noticed one Saturday morning that Neil had a chicken wire fence attached to our fence on his side to ground. Never a problem with our leaves again. He never complained about our leaves. He solved the problem. When we thanked him, Neil said, “We like you. You two work hard. The chicken-wire was easy.” He had the gift of problem solving & love Tracy. He wouldn’t let us pay our fair share. We were so fortunate to be their neighbors. I see their smiles every time I drive buy their house.

Our sympathy Tracy. Obituary wonderful. Thank you for that. We say well, “well done Neil!”

Janel, Bob and Benjamin Taylor.

Janel & Bob - May 10, 2021 at 11:10 AM



“ *If Neil Dillard was listed in the dictionary, his name would be synonymous with honest and class act. I have known Neil and Mary Ellen most of my life. I was a Mary Ellen grade school student in Benton,IL. I knew Neil through my Father in Benton. I came to Carbondale for my College years and stayed for over 38 years. Neil and I worked together in personal business situations many times over the years. My wife and I were good friends with Neil and Mary Ellen. We loved them both dearly. They were two of the best people you could have in your life.*

Jack D Brown. - May 08, 2021 at 11:09 PM

AB

“ My fondest memory of Neal was from one of the early Keep Carbondale Clean days, and I was doing my radio show (Take A Music Break) live from Turley Park. It was a cold, windy day, and when Neal saw me shivering, he gave me his wonderfully warm, brown, jersey gloves. He and Mary Ellen were faithful listeners, and never hesitated to show their support. I miss them both.

Jean Armstrong Balsley

A Jean Balsley - May 07, 2021 at 12:57 PM

AB

Sorry I misspelled Neil.

A Jean Balsley - May 07, 2021 at 12:59 PM

VD

“ They surely don't make them like Mr. Dillard anymore. What a wonderful man and what a wonderful partner he had. Thanks to both of them for all they did for Carbondale and SIU. This is a beautiful writeup for a beautiful man and those of us who went to school or worked or attended college at Carbondale are so fortunate that he was at the helm of our city for so long and Married someone who loved southern Illinois like we do. Thank you for your service kind gentleman and rest in peace. A job so well done and such a lasting legacy.

valeri DeCastris - May 07, 2021 at 12:32 PM

KM

“ Sending my condolences to all who mourn Mayor Dillard's passing. Respected and adored His community lifelines. Lived a busy, steady, faithful, humble committed get er done life. Honor to have had Him strong for Carbondale IL and other communities. His wife was my Career work teacher at Lincoln Jr High in 78-79 ...8th grade. Keep His legacy in your hearts, minds, and souls. He rests and yet is strong as angels with Jesus keep watching out for others. Peace to all. I applaud His servanthood. Karen McNeely McMinn. Carbondale IL

Karen McNeely McMinn - May 07, 2021 at 11:36 AM



“ Simply Elegant Spathiphyllum was purchased for the family of Neil L Dillard.



April 29, 2021 at 05:33 PM