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## Veteran Bay Area developer Lee Brandenburg dies at 87

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Most know [Lee Brandenburg](#) as a prolific Silicon Valley developer and luxury mobile home mogul, but those closest to him say that more than a savvy businessman, he was a humanitarian with a firm handshake and a passion for singing big band music to anyone who would listen.

“He [Brandenburg] would call me up and he wouldn’t say hello ... he’d literally be singing a song and if I didn’t pick up the lyrics he would be pissed — in a loving way,” [Andrew Bales](#), CEO of [Symphony Silicon Valley](#), remembered with a laugh in an interview Wednesday night. “So we’d sing, and my whole office would roll their eyes and say, ‘Oh my gosh, they are at it again.’”

Brandenburg, founder of Brandenburg Properties and partner at Brandenburg, Staedler & Moore Mobile Home Communities, died Dec. 28 at the age of 87 after suffering a heart attack.



THE BRANDENBURG FAMILY

Lee Brandenburg holds a wood-carved picture of himself.

He died surrounded by family and friends exactly nine months after his son, Eric Brandenburg, who also died from a heart attack, and a mere 10 days after setting up a new philanthropic fund in his son's name.

"Clearly, his heart broke, as did Diane's [Brandenburg's wife] with Eric's passing," Bill Baron, partner at Brandenburg Properties, said in an interview Wednesday. "He and Eric were as close as a father and son could be, and he had difficulty understanding why Eric and not him, as that was the logical progression."

But after his son's death, Lee Brandenburg continued to check in on projects and to smile, and he created a fund in his son's name, Baron said. He seeded Eric Brandenburg's legacy fund with "significant" capital, which will be used "to support through financial means ... what we will call random acts of kindness" and local grassroots movements that might otherwise not get off the ground, Baron said.

Indeed, the Brandenburgs have long been investors and philanthropists in such causes in Silicon Valley.

The Brandenburg Family Foundation gave nearly \$470,000 to local charities in fiscal year 2016, ranking number 30 on the Silicon Valley Business Journal's Corporate Philanthropy List last year.

But the well-known developer first began making his mark in the Valley in the 1960s and '70s, building upscale mobile home communities with two partners, Rudy Staedler and John Moore. The communities were the group's solution for both high-quality and affordable housing in the Bay Area before many in the area were talking about such issues, Baron said. In the late 1970s, he formed Brandenburg Properties with his son.

Brandenburg Properties was perhaps best known locally for developing the award-winning Cinnabar Golf Course in San Jose. But the company's reach also spread to more than 15,000 acres of property in six states and British Columbia.

In San Jose, where the group is particularly active, Brandenburg was behind entitling and building projects like Silver Creek Estates in South San Jose, and Waterford, a 104-acre mixed-use development at Capitol Expressway and Highway 87. He also helped fund the purchase of the historic Old Fire Station One to help get the San Jose Fire Museum off the ground.

“Lee squeezed every last drop out of life — and we’re all better off for it,” San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo wrote in a statement about Brandenburg on Wednesday night. “He literally helped to build our city, and he leaves a legacy of great friendship and philanthropy to many. He was an iconoclastic author and thinker, and an even more passionate doer. ”

Opinions on which of Brandenburg’s projects have had the biggest impact on the Valley vary depending on who is answering.

Former San Jose Mayor Tom McEnery, who had known Brandenburg for 45 years, says the veteran developer’s visions — many of which he got to see come to fruition — were often ahead of their time.

“Whether I liked his ideas or not, they were always fascinating,” he said in an interview Wednesday.

Outside of development, Brandenburg had an extensive list of interests, hobbies and accomplishments. He regularly attended The Masters Golf Tournament, and was an amateur player in other televised golf tournaments. He wrote two books in his lifetime, including “The Captive American” and “Dawn of Darkness,” a novel about the Bataan Death March during the Second World War.

Brandenburg also co-produced with William Crain the 1989 movie “The Kid From Not-So-Big”, which was shown on HBO. He was working on a screenplay before he died.

Those close to Brandenburg say he had a knack for making friends anywhere he went. That included with big-name celebrities and personal heroes, Baron said. On more than one occasion, Brandenburg met with the Dalai Lama.

But McEnery, who calls Brandenburg “a Silicon Valley original,” says that never went to his head.

“He wasn’t into just talking to important people — and with his success he could meet just about anybody he wanted in the country or the world, really,” he said. “But he liked people who had a dream and were willing to work hard for it, even in small projects like the San Jose Fire Museum.”

Brandenburg is survived by his wife of 66 years, Diane, and their children Karen, Gary and Bill, along with four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. He also leaves behind his two favorite cats, Scamp and Miss Muffit, according to an obituary released Wednesday.

In celebration of his life, Brandenburg said before his death that he wanted a “big-ass party,” a request his family plans to honor in the coming months for those who were close to him.

In lieu of flowers, the Brandenburg family asks friends and acquaintances express a random act of kindness, or donate to The Silicon Valley Children’s Fund, [The Forgotten International](#), the Tibet Fund, or any nonprofit.

“After all, Lee [Brandenburg] believed that if only our world could be a little kinder with a bit more shared empathy among us, we’d certainly be better off,” reads Brandenburg’s obituary, written by Baron. “Lee will be missed, though never, ever forgotten.”

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