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## Merton G. Henry: A Legacy of Leadership

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## COMMENTARY

## Merton G. Henry: A Legacy of Leadership

by David Richards

I first met Mert Henry in November 1996, for a job interview. That means my relationship with him was limited to less than a quarter of his 92 years. Others knew him longer and better. Many of them attended his celebration of life on April 14, 2018, at Trinity Episcopal Church in Portland. A few spoke lovingly and eloquently about him—his children, Donald, Douglas, and Martha, as well as Senator Susan Collins. I will attempt to convey the magnitude of Mert's greatness even though I only knew him in the twilight of a long and distinguished professional career and was aware of many of his achievements only retrospectively.

My interview for the position of assistant director at the Margaret Chase Smith Library in Skowhegan took place at the offices of the law firm that bore his name, Jensen Baird Gardner & Henry. Befitting a founding partner, his office was spacious, but not regal; he was self-assured, but not pretentious. In fact, the interview was delegated to the library director. Mr. Henry played the role of gracious and interested host, not meddling and interfering board member. I must have made a favorable impression because I got the job.

For the next 15 years as assistant director of the library, my connection to Mert Henry was in his capacity as president of the Margaret Chase Smith Foundation, which meant he presided over board and advisory committee meetings at which I reported. He was always well prepared, in control, and good humored. The moments that most stand out in my memory are watching him grill investment advisors, yet giving

them a fair shake and ultimately judging them by returns. He could make them squirm with discomfort, but it was never personal. Mert had a mirthful side and often presided over advisory committee dinners in garish combinations of colorful plaids. He was unfailingly compassionate, too. I remember hearing him at one meal quietly but firmly rebuke someone for toying with an older person whose memory was faltering.

Mert's greatest gift was as a fixer. With long experience and vast connections, he found no problem to be insoluble. I well remember his calm counsel when the library was accused of supporting a "homosexual agenda" for inviting high school students to share their views on civil rights for the 2006 Margaret Chase Smith Essay Contest. When it came time for the library to shift affiliations in 2012, it was Mert who had the institutional knowledge and network of relationships to spearhead the transfer of administration from Northwood University in Michigan to the University of Maine, all the while reassuring a nervous library staff. Mert was fully engaged right up until the end. I emailed him as recently as a week before his passing about the policy for retaining foundation records.

After I was appointed library director in 2012, I became more privy to Mert Henry's extraordinary talents and amazing career. Over the years, I had heard him talk about working in Washington for Maine Senator Frederick Payne during the McCarthy era, how the anticommunist paranoia was so pervasive that all friendships and associations were called into question. I knew

that back in Maine, Mert was politically well connected and well regarded, that future Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell had been a partner in Mert's law firm, and that Senator Susan Collins sought his advice. His politics were clear, but never oppressive. He was a staunch Republican, until the party began drifting, no make that stampeding, away from his standards of moderation and civility.

I could tell the depth of respect for his friendship and leadership by the large turnouts at ninetieth birthday parties held for him in 2016. The one at the Portland Country Club brought out the state's Republican establishment, as well as both of Maine's US senators, Susan Collins and Angus King. The other party turned out scores of family and friends for a celebration at Piper Shores, the retirement community he helped create in Scarborough. The lengthy list of accomplishments compiled in Mert's obituary is impressive, but it was the breadth and depth of relationships represented at those two parties that affirmed the measure of the man.

My enduring memory of Mert will be the origin of his connection to Margaret Chase Smith. It began in 1948 when he was a Bowdoin College student back from Army service in the Philippines during World War II. As a member of the Young Republicans, he decided to support Representative Smith as she sought the Republican nomination for an open US Senate seat. There were four candidates in all. Two had the credential of Maine governor. Yet, Mert cast his lot with the lone female candidate. What's even more remarkable than



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his political savvy at the age of 22 is that his dedication to Margaret Chase Smith lasted for another 70 years, as her political supporter, personal attorney, library advisor, and Margaret Chase Smith Foundation board member.

In compiling this testimonial, I have been struck by the many qualities of leadership manifested by Merton G. Henry: dedication, moderation, friendship, wisdom, compassion, humor, knowledge, grace, and humility. In this list, I hear a familiar echo of I Corinthians 13:4–7: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not

proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

Leadership, true, self-less leadership, not the self-indulgent, narcissistic, and demagogic kind frequently on display today, is ultimately an act of love, for country, for community, and for family. Maine has lost one of its greatest disciples of that virtuous ideal. May Mert’s legacy of leadership, like Margaret Chase Smith’s, live on. 🐟



**David Richards** started working at the Margaret Chase Smith Library in 1996 and has served as director since 2012. During that time, he has facil-

itated a wide variety of programs for the Maine Humanities Council. In addition, he has taught writing classes for SAD 54 Adult & Community Education at the Somerset County Jail since 2010.



*Merton G. Henry and Margaret Chase Smith at the Susan L. Curtis Foundation dinner in 1989. Photograph courtesy of Margaret Chase Smith Library.*