

To 'Soapy,' everyone was somebody

By Tim Richard
and Wayne Peel
staff writers

To others who have been a "nobody," To Soapy Williams you were important.

"He was never above anybody. The smallest person could come up to him," said Darlene Berent, an Oakland County Democratic staff member and sometime candidate.

"He took time to talk to people. He took time to talk to me. I wasn't anybody."

That and a legacy for integrity in government were the kinds of memory left by G. Mennen (Soapy) Williams, who died Tuesday at 76 after 50 years of public service in the U.S. Navy, as governor of Michigan, in two U.S. State Department posts and as chief justice of the state Supreme Court.

"Soapy set a pattern of honest government, not only for his own administration, but for all the others to follow," said U.S. Rep. Sander Levin, D-Southfield, himself a former gubernatorial candidate.

"He gave the Democratic Party — and government — back to the people," recalled Philip Power, chairman of the board of Suburban Communications Corp. (parent company of the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers) and a 35-year friend.

"He wasn't a crook, he wasn't a union goon, he wasn't a captive of special interests. Instead he was a man of foresight and vision."

"I WAS WITH him last night," said a stunned state Sen. Jack Faxon, D-Farmington Hills. Other than Williams' wife Nancy, Faxon may have been the last person to shake the hand that shook tens of thousands of hands, from presidents and "nobodies."

Faxon Monday night eulogized area patron W. Hawkins Ferry at a program where the Williamses were in the front.

"Just before he left, I went over to him and shook his hand and kissed Nancy," Faxon said.

Williams was a patron of art, Faxon said. To the Detroit Institute of Arts, he gave much of his African collection, accumulated during his stint in Africa in the Kennedy Administration. He also donated Chinese export porcelain collected while he was ambassador to the Philippines.

"He was a very religious man, active in the Episcopal Church," Faxon said. "I think he was very forgiving and very giving. He just did not carry a grudge. . . . Even when he was blamed for the payless paydays, really the fault of some of us here, he never blew up."

Margaret Halava, vice president of Suburban Communications and Williams' appointments secretary for the last four years of his term as governor, had similar memories.

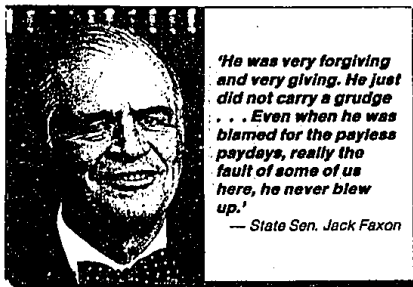
"Here was a man who could have just sat back and clipped coupons all his life," she said. "But he was a very religious man, a very disciplined man and I think that's what drove him. It was a commitment to help people that was genuine and deeply felt."

WILLIAMS was honored that Oakland Democrats three years ago started a Soapy Williams Golf Classic as a fund-raiser, Berent recalled. "Anybody who golfed with him had a great time."

"He was pleased to be part of something while he was alive rather than memorialized later," said Berent.

"We had one set for this year. He had it on his calendar," she said. "He was not a small talker," said Mary Ryan Taras, who was Oakland Democratic chairperson when the golf outing was started.

"He was always talking about ideas — 'What do you think about this or that?' He was undersecretary of state for African affairs in the early



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— State Sen. Jack Faxon

1960s), and I was a young teacher in Africa, working on a project called Teachers for East Africa. He talked ideas," said Taras, a Birmingham teacher.

At an Oakland Democratic fund-raiser in about 1981, Williams rode a mechanical bull. "He was 70 years old, and he had been calling square dances. Nancy was just furious because she said he had a bad back," she laughed.

"HE TRULY loved people," agreed Aldo Vagnozzi, long-time Farmington Hills Democratic leader

who knew Williams from his first statewide campaign in 1948.

Vagnozzi recalled three things about Williams' term as governor from 1949-50.

• "There were never any scandals."

• "He appointed some terrific judges who are still working their way through the system."

• "And he was a civil rights advocate long before the civil rights leaders of the '60s."

"The last time I heard him was when he spoke to the senior citi-

zens in Southfield," said Dennis Aaron, a lawyer and county commissioner from Oak Park. That was a year ago, just after Williams retired after 16 years on the Supreme Court.

"It was on age discrimination. He said, 'Ya feel better and ya look better as long as you're working' — and he got a standing ovation."

Williams will be remembered for

being ahead of his time in recognizing the need for change in Africa. Taras, for instance, was a University of Michigan student when Williams repeated what was, for a white man, a controversial remark: "Africa for the Africans."

"You know — he was right," she said.

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