

Colleagues pay tribute to Bob Bliss

BY PAULA GARDNER

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Ann Arbor's commercial real estate community joined civic leaders, family and friends in paying tribute to Robert Bliss, a vice president at Swisher Commercial, at a memorial gathering on Nov. 17 at Ann Arbor Country Club.

The event was a fitting tribute for Bliss, his friends said. Over 200 people ate, drank and reminisced about Bliss, who worked for nearly three decades in the city's commercial real estate market.

Bliss died Nov. 14 at his Brighton home, following a five-year battle with cancer.

"Bob was a pretty private individual, very quiet unless he was in a party situation," said Gail Bliss, his wife of 51 years. "That's why we had a celebration of his life. That's what he wanted. We talked a lot about it over the last month."

Bliss worked at the Swisher offices in downtown Ann Arbor for 22 years, continuing this year even after he was too weak to keep full-time hours. For a while, he cut back to five or six hours a day, then switched to just a couple of days a week, Gail Bliss said.

Eventually, those hours took a toll and by summer, Bliss stopped going into work.

But Bliss' friends and colleagues remained in close contact, visiting him often and keeping him posted on the deals in the industry that he loved.

"Bob always claimed that real estate was not work to him," Gail Bliss said. "It was fun. He loved dealing with the people, he loved the sales, and he loved all of his community service work."

Bliss was born in Saginaw in 1936, and graduated from Ann Arbor High School and then Michigan State University. He took a job in the family business, The Quarry Inc., which for some time was in-

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— **Jim Chaconas,**
McKinley Commercial Brokerage

involved in physician supplies.

"Bob had no idea what he wanted to do, but he'd been talking about doing something else for a long time," his wife said. "I was encouraging that because I knew he wasn't happy."

Bliss found a natural niche in commercial real estate, starting at Charles Reinhart Realty in 1979 and moving to Swisher in 1985.

Swisher CEO Dave Hamilton was a close friend to Bliss, and was among the many regular visitors over recent months to Bliss' home.

Topics include University of Michigan football, since Bliss was an avid fan. The pair also looked forward to an annual hunting trip to Bliss' place in Beaver Island.

"We'd spend more time in preparation for deer season than actually hunting deer," Hamilton said, laughing.

Planning was a big part of Bliss' personality, Hamilton said. The pair also talked this fall about the plans for the memorial service.

"We'd talk about all of the prep-



Bliss

ago, he said. They kept in contact for several more years, "then in 1994 he recruited me to come to Swisher," Hamilton said. "He talked everyone else into taking a chance with me."

The Swisher office is tight-knit, Hamilton said.

"Bob has always been an integral part of that, from one end to the other. He was always willing to help someone."

One of his skills in real estate was listening, Hamilton added.

"Bob would prompt a conversation, listen to people's input, weigh the evidence and come up with some good ideas," he said.

But that didn't mean there would be long conversations. Many of his colleagues note — amid some laughter — that Bliss was a man of few words. One called him "the master of unintentional understatement."

Yet his presence was always felt.

"He helped a lot of folks who came through the door, new people who didn't understand the business and were looking for a mentor and guidance," said Mike Giraud, a former colleague at Swisher.

John Evans of Swisher counts himself among those whom Bliss had mentored. That work relationship led to a friendship that continued as Bliss lost strength over the summer and into the fall.

It was painful to witness, Evans said, even though Bliss maintained his sense of humor.

"We knew we were going to lose him," he said. "We just didn't know when."

Bliss' professional priority was

maintaining integrity, Evans said: "Respect, to him, was more important than anything else."

That quality influenced how other commercial brokers interacted with Bliss, despite their positions as competitors.

"Bob was probably the most well-liked, honest commercial real estate broker in Ann Arbor," said Jim Chaconas of McKinley Commercial Brokerage. "You never worried about doing a deal with Bob Bliss."

Susan Moore, also of McKinley, said the crowd at Bliss' memorial celebration spoke volumes about his impact in the area. Cars filled the parking lot, and visitors overflowed into the hallways.

"It's a tribute to him that so many people in the real estate community showed up," Moore said.

Aside from his professional affiliations, Bliss assumed roles in a multitude of community organizations. Some were political, such as the Scio Township Board of Trustees and Planning Commission. Others focused on economic development, like the Washtenaw Development Council and Scio Township Downtown Development Authority.

Then there were his industry-focused activities, such as the Home Builders Association of Washtenaw County and the Ann Arbor Area Chamber of Commerce.

Bliss also was active in service groups, such as The Salvation Army, Boy Scouts of America and the Ann Arbor Jaycees.

In addition to his wife, Bliss is survived by the couple's four children and six grandchildren.

"We're going to miss him terribly," Gail Bliss said. "He's in a better place. But it's been a long struggle."

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