

HanfordSentinel.com

Former mayor Simon Lakritz dies

By Eiji Yamashita

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Simon "Si" Lakritz, former Hanford mayor and a civil rights advocate whose influence reached across the political spectrum, died of natural causes late Wednesday night at Kaweah Delta Hospital in Visalia. He was 78.

Lakritz was surrounded by family members when he died at approximately 11 p.m., Brad Lakritz, one of Simon's four sons, said this morning.

"He passed away very quietly," Brad Lakritz said. "It was the best thing that's happened to him at this point."

In late July, Simon Lakritz was involved in a heart arrhythmia-prompted traffic accident in Hanford. He was kept on a life-support in Fresno for nearly a week before he made a speedy recovery from his injuries and other health conditions. He spent the last several weeks at The Remington retirement home in town, where he engaged in daily therapy and spent his days in apparent good health until he suddenly fell ill a week ago, according to Brad Lakritz.

Simon Lakritz was admitted to Hanford Community Medical Center that evening before being transported to the Visalia hospital on Saturday.



Simon Lakritz enjoyed a visit by his three grandchildren, Noah, 12, left, Emily, 18, middle, and Mia, 10, right, at The Remington in Hanford. The photo was taken the day after he was released from the hospital in August. (Contributed)

Lakritz, a retired educator, is a former mayor of Hanford. He served on the city council between 1974 and 1986 and again between 1988 and 2000. He also served on the Hanford Joint Union High School District board from 2002 to 2006.

In Hanford, Lakritz is known as a civil rights advocate and an outspoken liberal who drew respect from all facets of the community.

A scholarship has been established in his honor by the Kings County Democratic Central Committee. The formal announcement is expected to be made at the committee's annual dinner on Sunday at Irwin Street Inn. The announcement was supposed to be a surprise to Lakritz, if he had been able to attend the event, according to Brad Lakritz.

Simon Lakritz was born in Detroit, Mich., in 1930, the son

(Contributed)

of a Jewish mother with a Polish-German background. He moved with his mother, brother and sisters to Arizona in the 1940s. He attended Tucson High School from 1945 to 1949 and the University of Arizona from 1949 to 1953.

Upon graduation from college, Lakritz entered the U.S. Army, stationed in California at Fort Ord. He served during the Korean War at the European Army central command, in Heidelberg, Germany. Before leaving Germany, Lakritz married Mary "Mimi" Elizabeth Lyon at Fort Ord, and both traveled to Europe to begin married life overseas.

After returning to the states, Lakritz obtained his master's degree in Latin American history and pedagogy from the University of Arizona.

Soon after receiving his degree, Lakritz and his family moved to California and began his first job at Hanford Joint Union High School as a history teacher. And he proved himself to be a popular educator.

Lakritz loved to teach by example, family members say.

According to them, he once dramatically taught a lesson that would stay in his students' memories for the rest of their lives. To illustrate how witnesses, if put under extreme pressure, have trouble remembering the facts of events, he staged a "murder" in the classroom, in which he was shot by a masked assailant. He later quizzed his students on what they experienced.

Lakritz went on to a career of 37 years teaching and serving as coordinator of federal programs for disabled and economically disadvantaged students at Hanford High School until his retirement in 1994.

While he led a successful career in education, Lakritz also had a second career in politics.

During his 25 years on the city council, he served five times as mayor. He also ran twice unsuccessfully as a Democratic candidate for the 17th Congressional District seat. In 2002, he was elected to the Hanford Joint Union High School District board of trustees, and also served as a mentor to teachers at Chapman University.

Along the way, Lakritz volunteered his time to community organizations, including the NAACP, the Kings County Commission on Aging, of which he was a co-founder, and the Hanford Taoist Temple Preservation Society.

Simon Lakritz was known for his fervent liberal political views as well as his sense of humor.

"I'm an outcast. I'm tolerated," Lakritz quipped to a Sentinel reporter during the last presidential election in 2004 about the political climate of a conservative Valley town like Hanford, where his liberal views are often considered a minority. Lakritz, in fact, has many friends, both liberal and conservative.

While describing his commitment to be politically active as long as possible, Lakritz also told the reporter at the time: "The body goes faster than the mind."

Lakritz gave his last extensive interview to The Sentinel in February when he was featured in the paper for its Black History Month series "12 People You Should Know." He was among the individuals recommended by NAACP members to be recognized as those who made a difference in the community.

Simon Lakritz was preceded in death by his wife Mary "Mimi" Elizabeth in 1991.

Surviving are his four children, Andrew Morris Lakritz, Jeffrey Lakritz, Bradley William Lakritz and Thomas Spencer Lakritz, and his four grandchildren: Ania, 11, of Arlington, Va.; Emily, 18, Noah, 12, and Mia, 10, of San Rafael. Funeral arrangements are incomplete.

The reporter can be reached at 583-2429.

Sentinel Reporter Seth Nidever contributed to this report.

(Sept. 18, 2008)

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