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Upholding and continuing William Lyon's legacy: Chris Simonsen



General William Lyon sits and laughs with his wife, Willa Dean Lyon as they listen to the speeches the speakers prepared in 2013. (Photo by ISAAC ARJONILLA, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/SCNG)

By **CHRIS SIMONSEN** |

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May is Foster Care Awareness Month.

There is nobody in Orange County that did more to bring awareness to the challenges endured by foster youth, especially after they leave the child welfare system, than General William Lyon who passed away last Friday.

There is no doubt that he was a true titan in the Orange County business community but many in our county may not realize the instrumental role he played in highlighting the tragic issue of child abuse and the needs of those youth who enter foster care because of this abuse and neglect.

When I joined Orangewood Foundation as its CFO back in 2007, like many of us, I knew little about the child welfare system and the struggles endured by youth from the foster care system. I believe this was also the case with General Lyon when he was approached in 1980 to head up a public-private partnership with the County of Orange to raise \$8 million from the community to build a county emergency shelter for foster youth, the Orangewood Children's Home (now called the Orangewood Children & Family Center).

At this time, General Lyon was running his successful homebuilding company and in the midst of buying an airline (Air Cal) with his long-time friend, George Argyros. However, his compassion for children rose to the forefront once again and he accepted this challenge, knowing this facility was desperately needed in the County.

Five years later, after countless hours of meetings/arm-twisting with donors, contractors, the County Planning Department and many, many fundraising events, the \$8 million had been raised and the County shelter was opened in 1985.

That could have easily been the end of General Lyon's support for foster youth and the Orangewood Foundation could have been closed. However, this project touched his heart and made him realize that there is so much more that needs to be done to address the significant needs of foster youth, especially once they leave foster care as 18 year-olds, forced to navigate life with little or no support system around them.

So under his continued leadership as the chairman, Orangewood Foundation looked for other ways to support these youth. The first new program was a college scholarship program for former Orange County foster youth that has now served thousands of youth pursuing their educational and career dreams.

Over the next 35 years, in keeping with General Lyon's guiding principles that "more can be done," Orangewood Foundation has developed numerous programs and services for current and former foster youth, young people experiencing homelessness and survivors or those at risk of sex trafficking. All of these valuable programs would have not been possible without the General's important and compassionate decision in 1985 to have Orangewood Foundation "do more".

I had the pleasure of having several private lunches at the Pacific Club with the General and his son, Bill, over the years. I was fascinated by the stories about his time in the military, his successful business career, and the challenges and innovative solutions he encountered as he raised funds to build the Orangewood Children's Home. I will always remember these lunches fondly. His generosity and leadership impacted the lives of tens of thousands of foster youth that he would never meet.

His creation of Orangewood Foundation is a lasting legacy for him and his family and I will always strive to uphold that legacy by leading Orangewood Foundation in a caring, compassionate manner just like General Lyon did for so many years. He will truly be missed.

Chris Simonsen is CEO of the Orangewood Foundation.

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