

Beth Padgett: Calder Ehrmann defined diversity



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(Photo: provided)

Calder Ehrmann had a trademark smile where his eyes would absolutely twinkle and you could see tons of goodness in the man and yes, a bit of mischief. He was full of good cheer, always had a kind word for a person, and was one of the most devoted disciples of diversity that has ever lived in the Upstate.

The announcement of Calder's death came Tuesday, and it caught many people by surprise. His energy always seemed without limits, and he seemed to always be everywhere. Calder had been fighting cancer, and he lost that fight Monday.

Friends of Calder's, many of them stunned to hear of his death at age 74, took to Facebook starting Tuesday night to remember the man who was Greenville's most well-known crusader for diversity, but also someone who always had time to help a person who needed a new job, wanted advice about a problem or had ideas for how to make Greenville a better, more inclusive community.

The "smile" was one of the first things people remembered about the man who often recognized he was an unlikely candidate for being such a champion of diversity given his race and age. He was born decades before the diversity movement took root in our society as business and community leaders ultimately recognized that merely opening the door to women and minorities was not an effective way to level the playing field.

Most of Calder's career was spent as a leader with Michelin. The international tire manufacturer discovered that Calder's skills as a manufacturing executive were at least matched, maybe exceeded, by his passion for diversity. He spent the last part of his 30-year career leading Michelin's diversity efforts as its chief diversity officer.

Calder moved as gracefully among Greenville's racial and ethnic groups as he did within elite business circles. Everywhere he went he preached the need to bring more fairness and inclusiveness to business operations. After leaving Michelin he helped launch the Diversity Leaders Initiative program at the Riley Institute at Furman University, and he helped spread this work throughout the entire state. Hundreds of business and community leaders have gone through those diversity programs, and they grew to respect Calder and simply adore the man.

Writing for this newspaper a few years ago, Calder said graduates of the program "have the tools to assure diversity's progress in a state with a legacy of race and gender issues." He saw the diversity program as important to opening doors and creating a more inclusive society, and also as a critical factor to improving the state's financial landscape and helping personal income rise.

Calder Ehrmann personally opened lots of doors and helped so many people in a life that ended too soon.

Beth Padgett is editorial page editor of The Greenville News and a graduate of the Diversity Leaders Initiative.

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