



George Russell

May 16, 1939 - December 30, 2022

George Russell, Frankfort, passed away December 30, 2022, and the world lost a true public servant with a unique and adventurous spirit. His dedication to free and fair elections was the hallmark of a varied and illustrious career, and he left behind a vast array of friends across Kentucky and around the world.

George was born in Rome, Georgia, May 16, 1939, to Faye Mitchell Russell and Joe Russell. He arrived in Kentucky by way of Texas, where he graduated from Abilene Christian University, and Chile, where he was a Peace Corps volunteer from 1964 to 1966. A connection made in Chile resulted in a job at the University of Kentucky Extension Service.

His community development work with UK led to leadership roles with Area Development Districts in Elizabethtown and Owensboro and then to a request from then-U.S. Senator Wendell Ford to join his staff in Washington, D.C. George returned from Washington to work in the campaign of Governor Martha Layne Collins and the Governor's Office during her administration. Following her term, he joined the Kentucky Secretary of State's office in 1989.

His elections-experience portfolio grew in Kentucky, where he oversaw the implementation of the state's first publicly financed gubernatorial election, and beyond, with his service as president of the National Association of State

Election Directors. That association provided the conduit that set Russell on his path as an international elections observer.

His foreign adventures were a logical outgrowth of Russell's career working with elections in Kentucky. His 1999 retirement as executive director of both the State Board of Elections and Registry of Election Finance followed many years of service to both. He subsequently served three terms as a gubernatorial appointee to the Board of Elections.

In the late 1990s, at a point when many would be winding down their careers, George traveled to Albania for his first assignment as an international elections monitor as a representative of the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe.

This assignment proved his most dangerous and marked the beginning of what would become 19 missions he would take over the next two decades to assist foreign governments with elections -- often as an observer, but sometimes as an arbiter of disagreements among politicians.

George was part of a three-person international team on trips that took him from Kazakhstan to Malawi, from Montenegro to Cambodia, from Kosovo to El Salvador.

The assignments, their challenges and opportunities, gave the avid traveler a rich archive of memories. But it is an award he received domestically that he considered his greatest honor.

In 2002, he was nominated and elected by his former colleagues across the country to receive the Freedom Award from the National Association of Secretaries of State as the person who did the most to improve the election system in the United States.

He remembered well the award ceremony in Providence, R.I., and his comment that captured the theme of his work at home and abroad: “One of the greatest things we can do is export democracy.”

In his retirement, George kept a prodigious travel schedule, having recently returned from Israel and Jordan and with two upcoming trips planned at the time of his passing. Though travel was his first love, George had a zest for life and a vibrant curiosity that fueled many other interests.

He was a passionate Democrat who served as Chair of the Franklin County Democratic Party and supported countless Democratic campaigns. He was an avid art collector whose travel fueled an eclectic collection of international art. And above all, he was a collector of friends he cherished.

George is survived by those many special friends whose lives were enriched by knowing him. And he leaves behind his beloved godchildren, Trey and Megan Greenwell, and the Greenwell family, who he considered his family.

At his request, there will be no service. However, friends will host a Celebration of Life on January 15, 2023, from 5 until 7 p.m. at the Frankfort Woman’s Club, 200 Washington St., Frankfort.

Donations in his memory can be made to the Franklin County Community Fund, c/o Bluegrass Community Foundation, 499 E. High Street, Suite 112, Lexington, Kentucky 40507, where George served on the board, or to a charity of your choice.

Arrangements are under the direction of Harrod Brothers Funeral Home & Crematory.

Previous Events

Celebration of Life

JAN 15. 5:00 PM - 7:00 PM (ET)

Frankfort Woman's Club
200 Washington Street
Frankfort, KY 40601

Tribute Wall



“ *George Russell*

October 06, 2023 at 03:15 PM



“ *Gary and I are so sorry to hear the news of George’s passing. Spent almost every Tuesday for 17, 18 years for coffee at The Meeting House B&B and enjoyed many Dinner Parties for the group It was a pleasure to have become friends with this wonderful, smart, friendly group of people listening to their stories of their political adventures. When the group got together for their dinner parties we always had to have Buttermilk pie George’s favorite. I’m so sorry for the coffee groups loss. Gary and Rose Burke, The Meeting House B\$B.*

Gary and Rost Burke - January 07, 2023 at 07:48 AM

SL

“ George was a person who made this world a better place. I met George when he was Executive Director of GRADD through my boss at the time, Owensboro City Manager Max Rhoads. Max had great respect for George and Max’s respect was not easily earned. So I made it a point to get to know George. I admired his ability to develop coalitions to achieve the goals that he was advocating. Also, George recruited and developed a great staff at GRAAD especially Jiten Shah. Years later, when George was Director of Election Finance, I would call George when I was involved in initiating new voter turnout drives. George always took time to work through detail and when we were through with business we enjoyed reminiscing about mutual friends, especially Max. George was a brilliant man who made a great impac. The world would be a better place with more people like George. God bless you George!

steve loyal - January 07, 2023 at 05:45 AM

JE

“ The world lost a great guy! Rest In Peace George. We were blessed to know you and have fun memories!

Jan and Rich Evans - January 06, 2023 at 01:39 PM

Jl

“ George Russell was a dear friend who modeled what it meant to be a public servant. He was an internationally recognized expert in his field but people respected and loved George more for his passion, kindness, unflappable good nature and warm personality. He valued genuine friendships and cultivated them better than about anyone I know. Working with George Russell meant you were going to be doing something interesting and having a lot of fun while doing it. I never left George where I didn't feel better about myself and life in general. What an irreplaceable gift George was to so many. My first session at my first NASS (National Assoc of Sec Sts) conference was at 8am in the morning and the topic was postage rates. I attended with my general counsel, John Kuhn, and was so bored I kept nodding off. John Kuhn finally said we needed to leave because I was embarrassing myself and him by being unable to stay awake and listen to the speaker. We went next door to an elections session being led by George Russell titled "Rock the Vote" in partnership with MTV. For the next 8 years I stayed as close to George Russell as possible and was always grateful and glad I did!! I learned to love public service and that it was humanly impossible to have a dull moment when in George's presence. I'll miss him dearly!

John Y Brown III - January 05, 2023 at 02:25 PM



“ Red Roses and White Carnations (Silk Cemetery Flowers) was purchased for the family of George Russell.



January 05, 2023 at 02:01 PM