



John S. Hager

Memories & Accolades
1927-2013



John and Marjorie Hager 2009

“The basic idea of democracy is simple. It means that people can and should govern themselves and that they do not need an elite or special class of leaders or citizens to run their affairs.” - John Hager

That was a principle that guided him throughout his life.



John and Marjorie Hager's grandchildren 2009

John S. Hager



John S. Hager, 86, died July 18, 2013, at his home after a long battle with Parkinson's disease. He was an Owensboro native, attorney, journalist, philanthropist and a life-long advocate for public reform.

John and his brother, Larry, were third-generation publishers of the Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*. John was also co-editor or editor from 1973 until 1996 when the newspaper was sold. He was president of Owensboro Broadcasting Company that operated WOMI and WBKR until it was sold in 1993.

During his tenure at the *Messenger-Inquirer*, the newspaper became Kentucky's largest family-owned newspaper. It was named one of the top five small city newspapers in the U.S. The newspaper was also awarded the Silver Gavel award of the American Bar Association. In 1996, the Kentucky Press Association presented John with its "most valuable member" award. In 2002, he was inducted into the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame. That same year, he received one of the Mayor's Awards for Excellence because of his extensive community leadership.

As publisher of the *Messenger-Inquirer*, John was an advocate for civic journalism, seeing the newspaper as a tool for enhancing the good of the community. He advocated relentlessly for access to low-cost higher education in Daviess County. In 1983, John served as the first co-chair of the Citizens Committee on Higher Education. In that capacity, he was instrumental in the establishment of the Owensboro Community College (now Owensboro Community and Technical College).

After the sale of the *Messenger-Inquirer*, he devoted his life to a number of charitable causes, particularly those he believed fostered community progress, education and the advancement of the democratic process.

In 1996, John and his wife, Marjorie, established the Community Life Foundation of Owensboro (now the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro). One key focus of the foundation's work has been promoting the empowerment of all citizens on issues of public policy, including sponsorship of two "AmericaSpeaks" town meetings. They were also generous supporters of the Goodfellows Club,

founded by John's father, Lawrence Hager, Sr. in 1912.

John was also passionate about other local and state causes, including city-county government merger and a constitutional amendment to overhaul Kentucky's courts.

John was a graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy, Princeton University and the University of Michigan Law School. He practiced law with the firm of Sandidge, Holbrook, Craig and Hager from 1954 to 1973.

John entered the U.S. Navy in 1945 and the U.S. Army Reserve as a second lieutenant in 1950.

He was director emeritus of the Owensboro Community and Technical College Foundation, member of the Kentucky Bar Association, member and past president of the Daviess County Bar Association, participant in the Shakertown Roundtable and a loyal member of the Democratic Party.

He served as a director of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association, Kentucky Economic Development Corporation, Kentucky Center for Public Issues, Owensboro National Bank, American Society of Newspaper Editors, Junior Achievement of Owensboro, Regional Vision 2001 and the Kentucky Reform Act Evaluation Governing Board.

John was a deacon at First Christian Church and a member of the Sessions Sunday School Class. He was also a member of the Owensboro Rotary Club.

He was a scholar, tenacious reader and tireless advocate for the community. Following his father, John considered the newspaper a public trust and not simply a business. He had a special interest in promoting openness and citizen involvement in government and public institutions.

He is survived by his loving wife of 60 years, Marjorie McManus Hager, son Stewart Hager (Yolla) of Knoxville, Tennessee; daughter Susie Hager Alford of Owensboro; daughter Sally Hager Wood of Owensboro; son Bruce Hager (Lia) of Cincinnati; and eight grandchildren: Josh Niehaus, (Stephanie) Aimee Alford, Sarah and Laura Wood, and John Paul, Alex, Lauren and Sydney Hager. He is also survived by his brother, Larry Hager.

Former publisher Hager dies at 86

By Keith Lawrence, *Messenger-Inquirer* – July 19, 2013

John Stewart Hager, attorney, newspaper publisher and civic activist, died Thursday. He was 86.

Hager left his mark on Owensboro with three distinct careers. And at the base of each of them was what he called "a bone-deep belief in the worth and dignity of every individual."

Born in Owensboro on April 3, 1927, Hager entered the U.S. Navy in 1945, following his graduation from New Hampshire's Phillips Exeter Academy.

After a year's military service, he enrolled at Princeton University, where he completed his bachelor's degree in 1950. He also entered the U.S. Army Reserve as a second lieutenant that year.

Hager returned to Owensboro in 1954, with a new law degree from the University of Michigan, to practice with the firm that would become Sandidge, Holbrook, Craig and Hager in 1960, when he became a partner.

But Hager soon became active behind the scenes in the operations of his family's newspaper, the *Messenger-Inquirer*. His grandfather, S.W. Hager, had moved to Owensboro in 1909, buying the evening *Owensboro Inquirer*.

And 20 years later, the *Inquirer*, under the leadership of John Hager's father, Lawrence W. Hager Sr., had bought the rival morning *Messenger*, merging the two newspapers into what would during the 1990s be Kentucky's largest family-owned newspaper.

By the 1960s, John Hager found himself spending more and more time on newspaper business.

And in 1971, he became president of the family's Owensboro Publishing Co.

He had already served as president of the family's Owensboro Broadcasting Co. -- which then owned radio stations WOMI and WBKR -- since 1953. He continued to serve in that capacity until the stations were sold in 1993.

Hager's responsibilities at the *Messenger-Inquirer* increased to the point that, in 1973, he quit his law practice to become co-publisher and co-editor of the newspaper.

Hager quickly made his mark in journalism.

In 1975, he oversaw news coverage of a constitutional amendment to radically overhaul Kentucky's court system and created editorials in support of the change.

In 1976, the American Bar Association presented the *Messenger-Inquirer* with its Silver Gavel award for that series of articles and editorials.

That same year, Hager was among 50 Kentucky journalists invited to Washington, D.C., for a press conference with President Gerald Ford.

A year later, Hager pushed the Daviess County Bar Association to evaluate candidates for judicial positions before the May primary each year and share those evaluations with the public.

Lawyers, he said, "have the best vantage point from which to evaluate the qualifications of judicial candidates."

In 1989, when his brother, Larry, decided to retire from the newspaper, John Hager bought his interests and became president and publisher of the *Messenger-Inquirer*.

In December 1995, Hager, ready to retire, announced that he was selling the newspaper to the A.H. Belo Corp. of Dallas for an undisclosed amount. Five years later, Belo sold the newspaper to Paxton Media of Paducah, which owns it today.

It had been expected that he and his older brother, Larry, would follow their father into the family business, Hager said at the time. "But I didn't try to instill that in my children. I wanted them to be whatever made them happy."

Not, he said, that he and his brother had been unhappy.

But times were different now.

"I'm not looking forward to a life of leisure," Hager said at the time. "I'm looking forward to a full and interesting life."

In 1996, the Kentucky Press Association presented Hager with its "most valuable member" award, in recognition of his services through the years.

That same year, Hager and his family created the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro, an organization dedicated to increasing public involvement in local issues.

The foundation's first grants were to support and enhance programs for a new child-care center at Owensboro Community College and a program at the Longfellow Education Center to target and work with students who are at risk of dropping out of school.

Later, the foundation tackled such issues as improving access to health care, riverfront development and parks.

"The basic idea of democracy is simple," Hager said in a 1996 speech at Kentucky Wesleyan College. "It means that people can and should govern themselves, and that they do not need an elite or special class of leaders or citizens to run their affairs."

He had long editorialized in the *Messenger-Inquirer* for more citizen involvement in the community's decision-making process.

Perhaps the pinnacle of Hager's career came in the early 1980s, as he worked tirelessly to persuade the community and the Kentucky General Assembly that despite having two four-year private colleges, Owensboro needed a public community college.

At the time, roughly 40 percent of Owensboro's high school graduates went on to college.

"Why should people find that acceptable?" Hager asked.

Today, more than 60 percent of local high school graduates go on to college.

"I was persuaded that the state was penalizing the community by not supporting higher education here as it was in much smaller cities," Hager said years later. "I chose to become an activist."

In 1983, the Citizens Committee on Higher Education was formed. Hager and Owensboro businessman Roger McCormick were named co-chairmen.

The committee first persuaded state officials to offer classes in Owensboro through Henderson Community College. Then, in 1986, with growing enrollments in the community college courses, the committee persuaded the legislature to create an independent community college in Owensboro.

In 1997, when OCC dedicated a monument to Hager, David Boeyink, former editorial page editor of the *Messenger-Inquirer*, told the crowd: "The honor bestowed on John Hager today is well-deserved, even if reluctantly accepted. John was never one to think in terms of building monuments."

But the honors weren't finished.

In 2000, the Community College Foundation of Owensboro Inc. again honored Hager for his tireless efforts to create a public college in Owensboro.

If the community college was his greatest success, Hager's greatest disappointment was the resounding 2 1/2-to-1 defeat of a proposal to merge city and county government in 1990.

For nearly a decade, Hager had editorialized on the need and benefits of merged government. And the Hager family had contributed \$13,870 to the pro-merger campaign.

"Sometime prior to 1973 (when Lexington-Fayette County merged), I became convinced -- and still am -- that our dual system of local government was inefficient and resulted in the inequitable and unfair distribution of local tax burdens on its citizens and businesses," Hager said years later.

Lawrence Hager Sr. had cast a long shadow in a day

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when newspaper publishers presented their views not only the editorial pages, but on the front pages as well. But changes in journalism meant that no publisher would ever wield that much power again.

And it was John Hager's belief that they should not. He encouraged reader participation in not only letters to the editor, but guest editorials as well. And he worked hard to maintain fairness and balance in the newspapers coverage -- even on issues where he had strong beliefs.

In a 1996 speech, Hager said, "The overarching community challenge for us now and in the 21st century is not economic development, not health care, not crime, not urban-county government, but how we practice democracy."

He asked, "Will we trust regular citizens to participate in resolving difficult public issues for the good of the individual and community?"

In 2002, Hager was inducted into the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame in recognition for his accomplishments in community journalism.

Hager had been a deacon at First Christian Church; a director emeritus of the Owensboro Kentucky Community and Technical College Foundation; a member of the Kentucky Bar Association and Daviess County Bar Association, of which he was a past president; a member of the Shakertown Round Table; and the Democratic Party.

He had previously served as a director of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association, the Kentucky Economic Development Corp., the Kentucky Center on Public Issues and Owensboro National Bank. And he had been a member of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Junior Achievement of Owensboro, Regional Vision 2001 and the Kentucky Reform Act Evaluation Governing Board.

Survivors include his wife of 60 years, Marjorie McManus Hager; four children; and eight grandchildren.

Arrangements are incomplete.



Staff and volunteers celebrate after the "We the People" AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting 2007



John with Ron Payne PRIDE Day 2005



John with U. S. Senator John Glenn

From John Hager Eulogy:

"Life is a journey, it is not a destination. It is not a goal. It is not some one thing to be fulfilled. In this journey it is more important to listen and ask good questions and to answer good questions – which we cannot do in a sleepwalk. We must be active, awake, alive, discerning, and as observant of others as we are ourselves. The deepest aspiration that one ought to have for their family, community, society, nation, and world – indeed for all of humankind, is peace. In our maturity, we come to realize that this peace is meant for here and now, for this life, not for some afterlife. Peace is living out the gift of life, doing the best we can, striving again and again to get it right. Life is a journey, it is not a destination. John's words.

Owensboro was home to John. It was not only the place that he lived, but the place that he loved. He felt a deep connection to this city and a pestering obligation to leave it better than it was when he got here.

If you ever talked with John for more than a minute or two, you know how in just three steps or less, he could move a conversation from any topic back to the subject of Abraham Lincoln.

He was known, at times, to drive his children to some of the most poverty stricken areas of this community and get them out of the car to walk around. And they would say to him, "Dad we don't want to be here, it's uncomfortable, we feel embarrassed to be here." And John's response was always, "Well, you should be embarrassed."

He had that direct way about him. He was never afraid to speak the truth and had little patience for those who acted out of their own self-interest.

John carried deep within him this principle, this conviction, that we are all responsible for the wellbeing of our neighbors. That was his polar star.

In his absence, John leaves a big hole in the fabric of this community that we cannot replace, but that we must all work to fill.

Owensboro was home to John. It was not only the place that he lived, but the place that he loved.

John's journey is just beginning. His legacy will course through this community like a stream of fresh water promising to nourish generations to come. Even in his death he will continue to bear fruit through the people he inspired and through his many investments in this community.

John believed that that banquet was here and now, not for some far off place. And he believed that it was big enough for everyone to take part.

T.S. Elliot: "we shall not cease exploration, and the end of our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and to know the place for the first time."

Rev. Jacob Caldwell

Senior Minister ● First Christian Church

"So much of what Owensboro holds in character, ambition, and execution can be traced back to John Hager. He held himself and those around him to high standards. And as I learned from our memorable meetings, and your family's warm and welcoming way of life, he also respected those who could make a strong case for what was true. It's a privilege to have shared the time that we spent together and to know the authority of his views -- his expertise in so much that is the history of Owensboro, Kentucky, and the country. John Hager led his life with tremendous clarity and purpose."

Keith Schneider

National Correspondent

From Lora Wimsatt's column:

... a great man whose legacy will live on through his many contributions that have enriched our community.

John Hager changed my life, not necessarily on purpose, but just because of who he was, what he did and how he did it.

I realized how kind and gentle his voice sounded as he told me what a good mother I was, how precious these days with my children were, how wonderful it was that I had created this happy memory for myself and for my son.

... a girl forever thankful for the opportunity he gave me.

"So sorry to hear about John's death. He was a very fine man and left a wonderful legacy... his mark is all over the place."

Judy Clabes

President and Founder, Kentucky Philanthropic Initiative
CEO, Scripps Howard Foundation

Editor, Kentucky Post

"We had an unusual individual for a good while. His wisdom, knowledge, commitment, and thoughtfulness will be missed by all of us. He was a true gentleman, scholar and a source of good for the people he cared for. I will miss him and his gentleness, concern and good humor. He was a rare man."

Douglas Scutchfield, MD

University of Kentucky College of Public Health

"A very bright light has gone out but, of course, lives on in many people and institutions. Such an amazing journey his life was, positively impacting so many lives."

Carolyn Lukensmeyer

Executive Director, National Institute for Civil Discourse

"John was a remarkable man, with as much passion and ambition to do the right thing as anyone I have ever met. He was relentless, persistent, intense, and always seeking the elusive truth in people and in himself... his moral compass, his sense of right and wrong, and his deep love of the community, was inspirational.

"John's vision for the Hager Family philanthropy is a model of how values, passion, and action, come together."

Peter Karoff

Founder, The Philanthropic Initiative

From Al Smith's column:

... the funeral of John S. Hager, attorney, newspaper publisher and civic activist who died at 86, was a reminder of how important he was in an era when the region's politicians dominated Kentucky's public life.

... he was an influential confidante of Owensboro's Wendell Ford, utility executive J.R. Miller, who managed Ford's campaigns for governor and the U.S. Senate, and of attorney Morton Holbrook, a counselor for Miller and Ford, and of Kentucky House Speaker Don Blandford who pushed through the legislature reforms for governance and education.

We admired the Hagers' respect for journalism as a public trust to promote the good of the community. The Owensboro *Messenger-Inquirer*, was cited as one of the top five "small city" newspapers in the U.S., I thought it rivaled *The Courier-Journal* for quality and vigor.

John Hager's editorial campaigns for constitutional reform and low-cost higher education drew statewide notice ...

His concern for honest journalism was also reflected in a more balanced account of the news and by printing opinions that disagreed with his ...

His paper was a farm league for talented young journalists

... the Hagers were almost unique in American community journalism

"Of course I was impressed with John's intelligence and influence," Dave Adkisson recalls. "But the trait I admired most was his constant desire to improve the community and himself. He was on a quest for knowledge until the very end, and on a spiritual journey to become a better human being."



**From Judy Jones Owens' column
Published July 23, 2013 in the
Lexington Herald-Leader:**

He was at ease with being in command, casually confident in himself and therefore entitled to set a high bar for others.

Hager was much more engaged, knowing and loving of his employees than I knew when I worked there. His courage, I understood at the time. His soul took a while to reveal itself. And what a magnificent soul he was.

"I don't know how you can give enough praise to John Hager for what he's done for this community," said **Bill Chandler**, who worked with Hager in pushing to create Owensboro Community & Technical College in the 1980s. "He and (former House speaker Don Blandford) are the reason that college is here today."

"He wanted everything done the fair way," Chandler said. "He was a great idea man. We have lost a true patriot. I don't know a family that's had more impact on this community than the Hager family -- John and Larry and their father. We need to do something to recognize John and what he meant to Owensboro."



David Adkisson was soon working with Hager in an effort to merge the governments of Owensboro and Daviess County -- one of Hager's passions.

"I think John was ahead of all of us on merger," Adkisson said. "But we couldn't pull it off. The community was having successes then with the River-Park Center, the community college and plans for a new (Natcher) bridge and that worked against us. Nobody saw anything that needed to be fixed with unified government."

He said, "I said later that I wished I could remake that decision. But John never backed down. He kept that flame alive. He was a brilliant man and Owensboro was lucky to have had him."

"I could not fill John Hager's shoes for years," **Jesse Mountjoy** said Thursday. "John was a very, very bright lawyer and tax technician. When he would come back to the firm, I always hoped I had the right answers to his questions."

Mountjoy later worked with Hager and others to create the RiverPark Center.

"He and Marge (Hager's wife) were both instrumental in the early years," Mountjoy said. "John was a visionary. He was one of a kind."



Waitman Taylor was mayor of Owensboro in 1973 when Hager began working full time with the newspaper, shaping its editorial policy.

"John always put Owensboro first," Taylor said. "He was a great friend. It was my privilege to work with him on several important projects. His integrity was above reproach. We didn't always agree, but that never affected our friendship. He will be missed."



"John wanted to be sure that the Goodfellows Club continued after the *Messenger-Inquirer* was sold (in 1995)," said **Barry Carden**, circulation director of the newspaper and a former Goodfellows board member. "So, he developed a fund to continue paying its administrative costs. It was definitely close to his heart. He had a deep love for this community."

"He was always interested in the betterment of the community."

Ed Riney



PRIDE Riverfront Workshop 2000



John speaks with Susie Tyler and others PRIDE Day 2005

"He believed that we are all responsible for the well-being of our neighbors."

Rev. Jake Caldwell



John with Fran Ellers and Theme Team members at the "We the People" AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting 2007

Hager hired **Ed Riney** in 1987 as the newspaper's chief financial officer. Riney worked his way up to publisher of the newspaper in the years after Hager's retirement.

"I understood business," he said. "John taught me journalism. I have a lot of respect for him. He was always interested in the betterment of the community."



John observes the Theme Team sorting through comments from participants in the town meeting

Bob Ashley was editor of the *Messenger-Inquirer* from 1994 to 2005.

"John had a passion for doing what he thought was right for the community," Ashley said. "He was deeply thoughtful and a force in thinking through issues. He had a warmth that was quiet, but he was reserved about showing it. He meant a lot to that community."



John has a conversation with syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts and *Messenger-Inquirer* publisher Bob Morris

Rodney Berry, who has served as president of the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro since 2000, reaffirmed Hager's civic commitment by saying, "He wanted only great things for this community. He was a patron of the arts and the largest private donor to the downtown master plan."

"He took special pride in the community college," Berry said. "John intensely valued education and lifelong learning. He was a deep thinker. Probably the smartest person I've ever known. He was so much more than a boss."

“He was a great citizen and a great philanthropist ... John was such a great advocate of communications. He encouraged us to always engage the public in anything we intended to do.”

Mayor Ron Payne



John speaks to Citizens Health Care Advocates meeting audience

Excerpts from John’s Ed Ryan Lecture speech on Monday, April 22, 1996:

Ed Ryan was an Owensboroan, a friend and a *Messenger-Inquirer* reporter before he joined the Louisville *Courier-Journal*.

In 1982, a citizens committee on higher education adopted a principle focused, bottom-up process. Because the committee faithfully followed this process, I do not recall ever doubting that public good would come of it.

The community has not addressed barriers to community problem-solving ... our community’s “rather scary urban-rural animosities” and the “yawning gulf between political elites and regular folks.”

The basic idea of democracy is simple. It calls for a bone-deep belief in the worth and dignity of every individual. It means that people can and should govern themselves, that they do not need an elite or special class of leaders or citizens to run their affairs.

The overarching community challenge for us now and in the 21st century is not economic development, not health care, not crime, not urban-county government, but how we practice democracy.

Excerpts from John's speech after his induction into the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame on April 2, 2002:

"We can't have a democracy unless citizens have the information to make sound judgments. When public institutions involve the public in making decisions, democracy flourishes. Everyone wins.

"We need more information from public institutions, delivered willingly by those who control it before important decisions are made.

"Openness is a civic virtue we must demand from every powerful institution in our society."

"He took special pride in the community college. John intensely valued education and lifelong learning."

Rodney Berry



John and family at Owensboro Community College dedication ceremony

"John was just a legend in this community," **Mayor Ron Payne** said. "He was a great citizen and a great philanthropist. He created the Public Life Foundation and we have used the Public Life Foundation so many times. John was such a great advocate of communications. He always promoted dialog and communications. He encouraged us to always engage the public in anything we intended to do. He will really be missed."



"He had a great love and passion for this community and for people in need," said **Sue Trautwein**, who worked with Hager 21 years at the *Messenger-Inquirer* and later at the foundation. "He supported all the colleges, the Goodfellows Club, the museums, the Boulware Center, all the things that mean so much to this community."

Rev. Jake Caldwell, pastor of First Christian Church said Lawrence W. Hager Sr., the second generation of the family to edit and publish Owensboro newspapers, expected his sons, Larry and John, to “carry the torch of leadership in this community. And they did it well,” Caldwell said.

“He was never afraid to speak the truth,” Caldwell said. “He believed that we are all responsible for the well-being of our neighbors.” Hager referred to it once as “a bone-deep belief in the worth and dignity of every individual.”

He was, Caldwell said, “a visionary and philanthropist. He leaves a big hole in the fabric of this community.”



John with PRIDE Day 2005 volunteers

***“He was a great idea man.
We have lost a true patriot.”***

Bill Chandler



John with PRIDE Day 2005 volunteers

"Bruce and Lia: We're saddened to learn of your father's passing and we will keep you in our thoughts and prayers. May the comfort of friends and family help you through these difficult days. Although it's difficult today to see beyond the sorrow, May looking back in memory help comfort you tomorrow. ~Author Unknown"

Perry & Becky Hasselbeck
Loveland, Ohio

"John was one of KET's most influential and committed friends for all the years of its existence. And Lil and I were immensely fond of him personally, as who wasn't. For all of us at KET who were privileged to know him, John was a wonderful friend who kept an eye on how KET acquitted itself in its mission to serve Kentucky. . .even as he himself served the commonwealth through his influential newspapers and his equally influential personal voice. He was one of the most engaged and engaging leaders in the larger community: his accomplishments will continue to enrich our lives and the lives of the generations to come."

Len Press
Lexington, KY

"John will be missed. He was a shining light for Owensboro. As Abraham Lincoln said, "In the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years."

William Speciale
Boston, MA



John with Leonard Pitts prior to Pitts' speaking engagement to Owensboro Area World Affairs Council



John and Marjorie Hager 2009



John shares a light moment with Jennifer Wright, project manager for "We the People" AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting 2007

"Jane worked for the M-I for over eight years as a proof reader and reporter/photographer. And I worked for the M-I as a boy as a newspaper carrier. Jane and I admired and respected John and the entire Hager family for their integrity and their devotion to the people of Owensboro."

John A. & Mary Jane Keelin Haley

St. Cloud, FL

"I didn't really know John but I know he must have been a fine man to have the love of a wonderful woman like Margie all these years. We can thank John for our community college! My prayers and thoughts are with you Margie. God Bless you."

Eleanor Grant

Owensboro, KY

"What sorrows you must suffer in losing John after his long, productive life. Many of us will enjoy happy memories of John from both public and private occasions. Doubtless, your memories will comfort you."

Sherry Bevins Darrell

Evansville, IN

"I cherish the time I spent in the Hager home working as Mr. Hager's assistant. Truly a great man! He deeply loved Mrs. Hager and his wonderful children and grandchildren. He touched countless lives in Owensboro. His legacy lives on!"

Pam Fort

Evans, GA



John greets Morton Holbrook III after an Owensboro Area World Affairs Council event 2007



John at Citizens Health Care Advocates meeting

"Our thoughts and prayers are with you as you all celebrate the life of your husband, father, and grandfather. His gentleness, his strength of character and his thoughtful and sensitive leadership for this community are a legacy that is appreciated and admired. His life has been one to celebrate. He lead admirably, gave with thoughtful kindness and with strength, shared visions that moved Owensboro ahead by decades. With affection and appreciation to all of you for sharing him for so many years."

Loyd and Barbara St. John

Owensboro, KY

"After years of close friendship, skiing, golf, tennis we have lost a dear friend. It is regrettable that we are unable to come to John's service. Our prayers and love to all the Hager families."

Joe & Nancy Stiles

Louisville, KY

"I appreciated the opportunity to work with Mr. Hager and all of you as he started the Community Life Foundation, now the Public Life Foundation. I learned a great deal from him and will always be glad for the experience. You have my deepest sympathy and my heartfelt prayers."

Kathy Oliver

Owensboro, KY

"This entire community will miss John's foresight, talents, and leadership. My heart is with his beloved family."

Donna Risley

Owensboro, KY



John celebrating with Tracy McQueen during the "We the People" AmericaSpeaks 21st Century Town Meeting 2007



John greets neighborhood leader Bobby McCormick



Hager family members after awarding grants to Kentucky Wesleyan College and Theatre Workshop Owensboro



“John Hager was a great community newspaper publisher, a lawyer and a member of the family that had the Owensboro paper. He wanted to make the paper in Owensboro to be one of the best in the country and it was judged at one point to be one of the best small newspapers in the United States.”

Al Cross statement made while appearing on Comment on Kentucky July 26, 2013

“I am so sorry to hear of not only the family’s loss but a loss to Owensboro. I worked at the M&I many, many years ago and had the pleasure of meeting and occasionally speaking with Mr. Hager. He was always a very kind gentleman. My thoughts are with the family and all of the Owensboro residents that will feel a loss with his passing.”

Guylene (Kincheloe) Cowell

Kansas, KS

“We extend our deepest sympathy to the family. The community will miss the philanthropic endeavors of Mr. Hager of which Boulware has been a grateful recipient. His vision has helped us change lives.”

Boulware Mission Board, Staff, and Clients

Owensboro, KY

“My sincere sympathy to all the family. I was fortunate enough to have worked with John, Larry and Mr. Lawrence for 20 years at the M&I. There are so many pleasant memories of work, picnics and Christmas parties. The Hagers welcomed employees into their family, treated us with respect and shared so much with all of us. Thinking of you Susie, Sally and all the family. You were blessed to have your father for so many years.”

Nancy Robinson

Louisville, KY

“I had a very successful newspaper career which I owe entirely to John. He was my mentor and my friend and he made a definite positive difference in my life.”

David L. Smith

Owensboro, KY



Whether Hager is remembered as an attorney, newspaper publisher or as a philanthropist, what's important is that he played an active role in his community and wasn't afraid to tackle even the unpopular issues, making him the kind of civic-minded citizen every community needs.

"Words are difficult to come by to adequately express the depth of my love and appreciation for all of you," Hager told the M-I employees in his retirement speech in January of 1996. "... As I reflect on the smiles and the tears and the hugs I occasionally picked up here and there, this is a truly reassuring moment of my life. I'm not looking forward to a life of leisure. I'm looking forward to a full and interesting life."

From the legacy that Hager leaves behind, there's little doubt that he indeed led a full and interesting life.