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William T. Powers

Photo by:
Powers

Former Durango resident William T. Powers died of emphysema Friday, May 24, 2013, in Lafayette. He was 86.

Born Aug. 29, 1926, in Salem, Ore., to Treval C. and Trista Wenger Powers, he grew up in Hinsdale, Ill. His boyhood was filled with a love for the stars, science and music.

Mr. Powers married Mary Andrews on April 7, 1955 at Chicago City Hall.

The Powers lived in Durango from 1991 to 2005.

“This was their favorite place” of the places the couple lived, their daughter Barbara Powers said. She said her father explored a lot of the backcountry around the area.

Mr. Powers also was interested in astronomy, and when he lived in Durango, he had a large telescope and a small observatory at his home, Ms. Powers said. He even created a computer program that controls the telescope to track a star or other astronomical feature, she said.

Mr. Powers had worked at Dearborn Observatory at Northwestern University. While there, he designed and built low-light-level television systems for astronomy, and designed and built a semiautomated observatory in New Mexico, used for successful supernova searches, among other things. He also designed and built an all-sky survey photometer for use on the moon in connection with Apollo 18, which was canceled, making Apollo 17 the last of the Apollo

missions.

He worked in the medical physics department at Argonne Cancer Research Hospital at the University of Chicago, where his interest in control systems began.

Mr. Powers credited Norbert Weiner's book Cybernetics as the inspiration of his often lonely, difficult journey, introducing a revolutionary concept of living control systems.

The late Phil Runkel, professor emeritus at the University of Oregon, one of the first to understand the importance of Mr. Powers' work, wrote: "In a decade or two, I think, historians of psychology will be naming the year 1960 (when your two articles appeared in Perceptual and Motor Skills) as the beginning of the modern era. Maybe the historians will call it 'the Great Divide.' The period before 1960 will be treated much as historians of chemistry treat the period before Lavoisier brought quantification to that science."

Mr. Powers' graduate thesis proposal at Northwestern University was rejected, but it became his life's work and the foundation for his classic, Behavior: The Control of Perception (Aldine, 1973). Many books and research articles followed, based on his control theory model of living organisms, now known as Perceptual Control Theory, or PCT.

Mr. Powers continued to develop his control theory model of living systems until the end of his life. He succeeded in leaving an important legacy: His work has reached professionals in the fields of biology, neuroscience, psychology, mental health, education, sociology, philosophy, economics, marketing, robotics, artificial intelligence and human factors.

"PCT is the biggest bite out of the fruit of the tree of knowledge that's been taken in 2000 years," said James Wilk, professor of philosophy at Oxford University in England.

Barbara Powers said her father "had a fascination with people" and that "he was a very kind man; he saw the best in everyone."

Mr. Powers was preceded in death by his wife, Mary Powers. He is survived by his son, Denison Powers of Longmont and Piedmont, Va.; daughters, Alison Powers of Lafayette and Barbara Powers of Durango; sister, Alice McElhone of Bloomfield, N.J.; and four grandchildren.

Family and colleagues will share their thoughts about Mr. Powers' life and accomplishments at a memorial at 3 p.m. Saturday, June 8, 2013, at the Boulder Outlook Hotel. Email ControlSystemsGroupConference@gmail.com if you would like to attend. Mr. Powers cremated remains will be buried next to his wife at Greenmount Cemetery in Durango at a future date.

In his memory, his family requests that people quit smoking and send a contribution to the Control Systems Group. For information, email Richard Marken at rsmarken@gmail.com.
