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Death claims former county resident, tech mogul

A former rural Columbus resident and technology innovator, died July 23 of cancer at Georgetown University Hospital near the nation's capitol.

Clay T. (Tom) Whitehead, 69, a telecommunications entrepreneur who played a major role in launching the commercial satellite industry in the U.S. and Europe and set the foundation for telecommunications policies that still guide the introduction of new technologies and the Internet.

Mr. Whitehead was a graduate of Cherokee County Community High School with the class of 1956.

An ardent believer in the marketplace of ideas, Mr. Whitehead dedicated his life to fostering technologies and policies that facilitated communication.

As the head of a White House, telecommunications policy office, Mr. Whitehead helped create a flexible, market-oriented policy for the newly developed communications satellite technology. The "Open Skies" satellite policy led not only a flourishing satellite industry, it permitted new cable TV networks, like C-SPAN, CNN and HBO to flourish.

After leaving government, Mr. Whitehead went on to found Hughes Communications, Inc. in 1978, which proved to be the Hughes Aircrafts Company's most successful enterprise. His idea to create Galaxy, a satellite system to carry television programming to cable operators across the U.S. became the model for satellite television distribution and broadcasting around the world.

In a similar vein, when he left Hughes in 1983, he created the first private satellite television business in Europe, now known as SES Astra, which brought satellite television broadcasting to Europe for the first time and now is one of the largest satellite companies in the world.

As the first Director of the White House Office of Telecommunication Policy, he set policy ground rules for the introduction of new technologies, such as cable, that revolutionized the existing broadcasting and telephone industries. Mr. Whitehead's goal was to introduce competition and deregulation into industries that had been characterized by intrusive government regulation and lackluster monopoly structures.

Specifically, his policy led to the Justice Department lawsuit that ended AT&T's monopoly on local telephone service. He also was responsible for a cable TV-broadcast TV compromise that led the FCC to loosen restrictions on cable television, enabling it to compete on a national level.

Immediately before leaving government service in 1974, he was one of four men that secretly planned Vice President Ford's transition to the Presidency in the month's before President Nixon's resignation.

Most recently, he was Distinguished Visiting Professor of Communications Policy at George Mason University.

Clay Thomas Whitehead was born November 13, 1938 in Neodesha, and grew up in Columbus.

As an ardent radio fan in his youth, he became particularly interested in long distance communication. He spent hours on his Heathkit ham radio talking to other amateur operators throughout the world.

Mr. Whitehead received an M.S. in electrical engineering from M.I.T. and Ph.D in management and economics from the Sloan School there. He was a member of the Pershing Rifles there and later served two years in the United States Army achieving the rank of First Lieutenant. He volunteered to go to Vietnam, but because of his expertise, was instead assigned to Edgewood Arsenal.

Mr. Whitehead was significant supporter of several free speech organizations, including the Freedom Forum and the Global Internet Freedom Consortium, a group dedicated to countering internet censorship in China. He also served on numerous business, policy and nonprofit boards, including the Yosemite National Institutes, an environmental organization that he chaired during its period of most dramatic growth.

He held the patent for a spot beam satellite whose signals could be detected by small antennae, making them more affordable for individuals and small business.

Mr. Whitehead took particular pleasure in eliminating an archaic ban on kite flying on the Mall in Washington D.C. Afterward, in celebration, he flew his kite as high as he could, so high that it landed high in the east window of the Monument causing a traffic jam on Fifteenth Street.

He loved to listen to live bluegrass and Cajun music and to fly. He maintained a pilot's license for most of the last three decades.

He was a member of St. John's Episcopal Church and the Metropolitan and Cosmos Clubs.

While a student at CCCHS Mr. Whitehead was a member of the band, science club, student council, math club and was selected to boy's state. He also served as president of his class during their freshman year.

Survivors include his wife of 35 years, Margaret, his two children, Dr. Abigail Craine of Lemoore, California and Clay C. Whitehead of San Francisco, and three sisters, Susan and Nancy Whitehead and Helen Conerly.