

Glenn W. and Patti Ferguson

First Peace Corps Director and Wife in Thailand

Glen's obituary by Joe Holley, Washington Post Staff Writer, Thursday, January 3, 2008

Glenn W. Ferguson, 78, a former ambassador to Kenya whose career included service as the first director of Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA), the head of four universities and the presidency of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City, died of cancer Dec. 20 at his home in Santa Fe, N.M.

An associate director of the Peace Corps and the first Peace Corps director in Thailand, he served as director of VISTA, often called the domestic Peace Corps, from 1964 to 1966.

Named ambassador to Kenya in 1969, he accepted his new post, his wife recalled, shortly after the family had moved into a new house in Bethesda and before they had sold their former house in Potomac.

"He called from the office and asked, 'Where in all the world would you like to go?' "Patricia Head Ferguson recalled, "I said Kenya, just as he knew I would."

In Kenya, he conducted his first news conference in Swahili. He also spoke Tagalog, Thai and German -- and enough Korean to order from Korean restaurant menus, his wife said.

He served as chancellor of Long Island University from 1969 to 1970, president of Clark University in Massachusetts from 1970 to 1973 and president of the University of Connecticut from 1973 to 1978. From 1978 to 1982, he was president of Radio Free Liberty-Radio Europe, based in Munich. He resigned in the midst of a long-running jurisdictional dispute within the Radio Free Europe-Radio Liberty bureaucracy.

Returning to the United States, he became president of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in 1983, noting that his only musical talent was the bongos. He learned the instrument during his tenure as ambassador to Kenya.

"He was very good on percussion," said his daughter, Sherry Ferguson Zoellick, noting that he also played the marimba and drums and sat in with a jazz group when he was president of the American University of Paris.

He left Lincoln Center after only nine months, noting in a statement issued by Lincoln Center that he was leaving the \$125,000-a-year position because "I feel I should pursue the career objectives with which I was associated before coming to the center." Nathan Leventhal, his successor, told the New York Times in 1988 that Mr. Ferguson "didn't know New York or like it much."

What he did like was trying new things, his daughter said. "In years past, he often joked that he never quite knew what he wanted to be when he grew up."

Glenn Walker Ferguson was born in Syracuse, N.Y., and grew up in Syracuse and Bethesda. After graduating from Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, he was an Air Force psychological warfare officer in the Philippines and Korea, where his job during the Korean War was to compose propaganda leaflets for dropping behind North Korean lines.

"It was one of the military's first efforts at psychological warfare," his wife recalled. "Glenn thought it was a hoot."

He received a bachelor's degree in economics in 1950 and a master's degree in business administration in 1951, both from Cornell University. A pitcher at Cornell, he was about to be signed by the Washington Senators when he hurt his arm and his professional baseball career ended before it began.

He received a law degree, after studying at the University of Chicago Law School, from the University of Pittsburgh in 1957.

Before entering government service during the Kennedy administration, he was a management consultant with McKinsey and Co. and assistant dean of the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh.

Mr. Ferguson was president of the American University of Paris from 1992 to 1995 and in more recent years was a writer, lecturer and consultant. He began keeping a daily journal in the 1970s and in the 1990s began compiling his thoughts and observations into books: "Unconventional Wisdom: A Primer of Provocative Aphorisms" (1999), "Americana Against the Grain" (1999), "Tilting at Religion" (2003), "Sports in America" (2004) and "Traveling the Exotic" (2005). He also served as founder and president of Equity for Africa, an innovator in providing small-loan investments to rural entrepreneurs.

He had been a Santa Fe resident since 1998 and was a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the Pacific Council on International Policy and other organizations.

Survivors include his wife of 57 years, of Santa Fe; his daughter, of McLean; two sons, Bruce Ferguson of Great Falls and Scott Ferguson of Berkeley, Calif.; and four grandchildren.

Here are Patti's notes about her career:

When we were living in Worcester, MA and in Connecticut, I took courses at the Universities, culminating in Master's degree in Human Resources for my 2 year study of Gerontology.

I started the Juniper Hill Village, a resource for elderly professors and spouses, which is based on the land adjacent to the University of Connecticut. Five years ago, I spoke at the opening of the Nursing Home Unit, which is adjacent to the Juniper Hill Village. Many of our professors and spouses are staying there now and it was grand to see them doing so well.

Since Glenn's death, I've continued to travel, visiting family in the D.C. area as well as in Mexico where our youngest son and his wife live. His older son is now opening an office in Hong Kong after teaching math to Chinese cities.