

WILLIAMS-SONOMA, INC.

W. Howard Lester, entrepreneur, retail pioneer and philanthropist dies at age 75

W. Howard Lester, American entrepreneur, devoted husband, beloved father, grandfather and cherished friend, died Monday at his home surrounded by his loved ones in Indian Wells, California after a 13-year long and courageous battle with cancer. He was a business icon, who for over 32 years guided the development and success of the Williams-Sonoma, Inc. portfolio of brands.

Howard lived the American dream during his life's journey. Born August 14, 1935 in Durant, Oklahoma, he was known to all as just "Howard." Despite being raised, as he often said, "on the wrong side of the tracks," he was a true renaissance man with so many achievements. Even with all his success, he never forgot his humble beginnings.

In the 1950s, Howard served in the Counter Intelligence Corp. of the U.S. Army and was stationed in Munich, Germany. After military service, he attended the University of Oklahoma where he met his first wife Wanda Eshelman. Always an entrepreneur at heart, he was constantly experimenting with new business concepts and product ideas. He started his business career selling typewriters for IBM in 1958. During the 1960s and early 1970s, Howard created several of his own companies, including the Coley/Lester Employment Agency, as well as a few computer service and software businesses. He also formed Centurex Corporation, which became one of the leading suppliers of software systems to the American banking industry. After selling the company in 1976, he "retired."

Never one to relax for long, in 1978, a friend introduced Howard to Chuck Williams, the founder of a small, authentic, French inspired kitchen store called Williams-Sonoma. Howard immediately saw the potential in what Chuck had created and it was at that moment that the dream began, the vision of building a company that would "enhance people's lives at home." It was at this moment also that a wonderful and enduring partnership began with Chuck that would last over 30 years.

Early in his career, Howard jotted down seven principles that eventually came to be known as "Howard's Rules." These rules speak to his beliefs; the need for vision, the disdain for arrogance, modeling of honesty and integrity, reverence for the accomplishments of associates, and above all, a belief in the value of the customer, "because without them, nothing else matters." Originally intended as guiding principles for his own behavior, still today, these "rules" guide the entire Williams-Sonoma, Inc. organization and are integral to the rich culture that Howard helped to build. These guiding principles offer insight into his dedication to world class customer service and his steadfast vision for the company. Rule #1 is a simple testament to his leadership style: "Without vision it is very difficult, if not impossible, to provide leadership to a company of any size. Dreams are important, never stop having them."

Howard's passion, integrity, perseverance and loyalty were the cornerstones of his success throughout his entire career.

When asked, in an interview with *The Oklahoman*, about how Williams-Sonoma impacted his own life, Howard replied, "It's about good living, and I enjoy that." Throughout the years, Howard often said that he was not an expert cook, but his combined talents as a skilled businessman and "frustrated consumer" helped guide the company through exponential growth from \$4 million in annual revenue to more than \$3.4 billion today.

As Chairman and CEO of Williams-Sonoma, Inc. from 1978 to his recent retirement in May 2010, Howard transformed business operations, taking Williams-Sonoma, Inc. public in 1983 while overseeing the development of more than 600 retail stores, seven direct mail catalogs and six online retail websites. He built a small kitchen company into an international, multi-channel specialty retailer that brought gourmet cookware and high quality home décor to consumers through the company's core brands including Williams-Sonoma, Williams-Sonoma Home, Pottery Barn, Pottery Barn Kids, PBteen and West Elm.

But Howard had a special passion for the original Williams-Sonoma brand and under his care, the brand came to be known for its innovative visual merchandising, retail customer service and beautifully photographed catalogs. Explaining the concept behind the brand, he told the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2004, "I think our store is about a lot more than cooking...Williams-Sonoma is an aspirational store, if you will, with a certain grand vision."

More than fifty years ago, Howard began a love affair with a game that would become one of the centerpieces of his life. Through golf, he forged many of his closest relationships. He attacked the game with the same passion and determination that he applied to his other endeavors. Either playing in his beloved AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am or enjoying his annual pilgrimage to the British Isles, his love for the game was unwavering. Whether he was competing in tournaments or just playing with friends, his quest to better his game was endless. Howard may have simply been his happiest on the golf course.

Howard chose to share this passion for golf through many ways, including serving as a national trustee for the renowned First Tee Program, serving as the General Chairman of the American Express World Golf Championship in 2005, chairing the 2009 Presidents Cup event in San Francisco, and serving as a director for the Bob Hope Classic Golf Tournament.

Howard strove to improve the lives of others through his philanthropy. With his wife Mary, they supported education, medical research, youth programs and the arts. In 1991, he founded The Lester Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation within the Haas School of Business at the University at California, Berkeley, which now carries on his legacy of business enterprise. In 2005, they endowed a new addition to the University of Oklahoma's Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art. Over the years, he and Mary helped fund vital cancer research programs at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, UCSF Comprehensive Cancer Center and St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Howard provided his resources, leadership and guidance to many organizations including: Boy Scouts of America, Conner Peripherals Inc., Delancey Street Foundation, Harold's Stores, Inc., Il Fornaio (America) Corporation, International Association of Shopping Centers, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and The Good Guys, Inc. He also served on the Executive Council of the University of California, San Francisco, and the Advisory Boards of the Retail Management Institute of Santa Clara University and the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley.

In 2001, Howard was elected to Oklahoma's Hall of Fame. In 2003, he was honored by the Haas School of Business as the Business Leader of the Year and also received an honorary degree from the University of Oklahoma the following year. In 2007, he received the Lifetime Humanitarian award for the Housewares Charity Foundation. Howard and Chuck together, in 2008, received the Direct Marketing Association's highest honor by being inducted into their Hall of Fame. Most recently, Howard was inducted into the Bay Area Council's Business Hall of Fame in October 2010.

Mr. Lester is survived by his wife Mary; his children: Kirk and his wife Sheryl; Kathryn Lindlan and her husband Tim; and Kristen Rio and her husband Steve; his five grandchildren: Claire, Charles, and Charlotte Lester, Luke and Sarah Lindlan and his niece, Elizabeth Lester Hartmann.

Funeral and Mass will be held at St. Ignatius Catholic Church, 650 Parker Street, San Francisco, California on Sunday, November 21st at 2:00pm followed by a reception at Delancey Street, 600 Embarcadero Street, San Francisco, California.

In lieu of flowers the family has asked that donations may be made to:

MD Anderson Cancer Center

www.mdanderson.org/how-you-can-help/make-a-donation/index.html

UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center

www.cancer.ucsf.edu/howtohelp/

Delancey Street Foundation

www.delanceystreetfoundation.org

St. Jude Children's Research Hospital

www.stjude.org/waystohelp

More information is available at www.williams-sonomainc.com