

HCC community mourns former president Bartley

HOLYOKE – The Holyoke Community College community is mourning the passing of its second president, David M. Bartley, a proud alum and fierce advocate for community college education and especially for HCC.

Bartley, 88, a lifelong resident of Holyoke and a former Massachusetts Speaker of the House, died Tuesday, June 13, after several weeks of hospice care. He served as president of the college from July 1975 to January 2004, a time of extraordinary growth and expansion, succeeding George Frost, the founding president of HCC.

During a 2021 interview, Bartley for instilling in him a love of learning and a desire to pursue greater goals. “He was my mentor, my friend, and the greatest guy I ever met in terms of education,” Bartley said.

“I’m gonna miss him. I’m really going to miss him,” said Tom Stewart, HCC director of Athletics, Activities, and Clubs, who worked with Bartley for eight years before the latter retired and maintained a close relationship with him thereafter. “He was really good for this place. He loved the school. He wanted kids to succeed.”

At HJC, Bartley studied liberal arts and developed some of the political skills that would serve him well later as a state legislator and Speaker of the House. He was elected president of his freshman class and vice president of his sophomore class. He was a member of the yearbook staff, co-director of the annual variety show, and parliamentarian of the Student Council. He also played baseball and captained the HCC men’s basketball team.

At graduation, the faculty selected Bartley as the student who most contributed to Holyoke Junior College.

As Speaker of the House, Bartley’s influence was critical in securing the state funds required to construct a new campus on Homestead Avenue after a 1968 fire destroyed the main campus building on Sergeant Street. To get it done, he worked together with another Holyoke native, Maurice Donahue, then president of the Massachusetts Senate.

“Without him being in the House and Maurice Donahue being in the Senate, we’re not sitting here right now,” said Stewart. “This place is still a farm. It’s not Holyoke Community College.”

His legislative highlights included the Bartley-Fox Act, which imposed a one-year prison sentence for illegal gun possession, and Chapter 766 legislation that supported mainstreaming special needs students in public schools.

In 1975, a year after the opening of the new campus, Bartley left the Legislature to succeed George Frost as president of HCC.

“He had done all of the hard work; all I had to do was administer,” Bartley said. Like Frost, Bartley said, “I wanted to ensure that everyone had an opportunity for an education in Western Massachusetts.”

Nevertheless, Bartley did a lot of hard work himself over the course of his 28 years as HCC president and left an indelible legacy.

One of his first initiatives as president was to start an Alumni Association, and the person he tapped to run it was none other than his mentor and predecessor, George Frost. In the 1980s, at Bartley’s behest, HCC created the first philanthropic commu-



David M. Bartley

nity college foundation in Massachusetts, the nonprofit HCC Foundation, which was launched with \$200 left over from a fundraising organization created after the 1968 fire called the Friends of Holyoke Community College.

The Foundation awarded its first student scholarship in 1987. By the time Bartley retired in 2004, the Foundation endowment had reached \$3 million. Today, the Foundation manages assets of more than \$20 million and over the years has awarded more than \$10 million in student scholarships while also helping the college build key academic facilities, including the Kittredge Center for Business and Workforce Development, the Center for Health Education and Simulation, and the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute.

He was never shy about using his political influence to benefit the college.

“I have wonderful memories of him,” said Idelia Smith, assistant vice president of Academic Affairs and a 41-year employee of HCC. “He was great fun to be with, and he drove far too fast. He loved the big Buicks.”

Bartley, so family oriented in his personal life, brought that sensibility to his work at HCC, supporting faculty and staff through personal difficulties and making exceptions to rules and regulations to help them.

“He was good to us and to me, specifically,” said Smith. “He was very fatherly. It was wonderful having someone like that at the helm.”

While Bartley was president, enrollment at the college grew from about 2,000 to more than 6,500. He

remains the only community college graduate in Massachusetts history to serve their alma mater as president.

“I have been at this college nearly 30 years,” Bartley said in 2003. “Each year has been exciting and rewarding. I have watched dramatic changes occur at this institution over the past three decades. There are challenges ahead, but the college is well positioned to continue its role as one of the leading community colleges in the state.”

In retirement, he remained closely connected to the college, playing in the HCC Foundation’s annual fundraising golf tournament that he co-founded as president, serving for many years on the HCC Foundation’s board of directors, and creating the Dr. David M. ‘54 and Bette Bartley Scholarship.

In her first days as HCC’s fourth president, Christina Royal received a letter from Bartley welcoming her to the community, a gesture she greatly appreciated. A friendship grew out of their conversations over the years about the college, the city, and the region.

“He was present at my inauguration in the fall of 2017, and I distinctly remember looking his way during a moment of applause. He seemed so very proud of this college,” said Royal, who will retire in July and be succeeded by George Timmons, who will become HCC’s fifth president. “HCC would not be the gem it is today without former President Bartley. How fortunate we are to have been beneficiaries of his leadership and generosity.”

Bartley leaves his wife of nearly 60 years, Bette Bartley, sons Myles Bartley, a New York lawyer, and David K. Bartley, a lawyer and Holyoke City Councilor, and daughter Susan Bartley, who works at MassMutual Center. Funeral arrangements are pending.