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Civic leader and philanthropist Betty Chapman, widow of Miami media giant, dies at 98

BY HOWARD COHEN

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In this March 11, 1997, file photo, Alvah and Betty Chapman talk after the dedication of the Betty and Alvah Chapman Conference Center in the Robert McCabe Hall at MDCC's Wolfson Campus. A. ENRIQUE VALENTIN EL NUEVO HERALD FILE

Alvah Chapman Jr. was asked once what had made him so successful.

The late civic leader and a man who [helped steer his adopted Miami into an international city](#), answered: “[I owe my success](#) to three things: my Christian faith; my wife, Betty; and the leadership training, education and sense of discipline I received at The Citadel.”

Chapman, CEO and chairman of Knight Ridder, the former parent company of the Miami Herald, said that in an interview that originally appeared in The

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Citadel Magazine in 1999. The Georgia-born media giant and community activist graduated from The Citadel military college in South Carolina in 1942. When he was a freshman, he met Betty Bateman, who was visiting the campus. A year after his graduation, in March 1943, the couple married.

His widow, Betty Chapman, died Wednesday morning in hospice care at her Miami home after she suffered a stroke on Feb 10, her daughter Dale Chapman confirmed.

Chapman was 98.

She, too, was a noted philanthropist and community activist — active, and honored, in fact, well into her 90s.

“We keep talking about Alvah on every occasion and there’s no question he’s deserving of all the accolades. But it’s never been a secret that the driving force behind his success was Betty,” said [Eduardo Padrón, president of Miami Dade College](#). “The two of them were the greatest community builders that I’ve known in all my time in Miami. She always impressed me as someone who was so unassuming but a true humanitarian and someone with great determination and class.”

HUMANITARIAN

In 2015, Chapman Partnership, the Miami organization that has aided the homeless for more than 25 years, named Betty Chapman its recipient of the prestigious, annual [Alvah H. Chapman, Jr. Humanitarian Award](#). The Chapmans formulated the organization years earlier.

<https://youtu.be/gvVxZgcSrKo>

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“I’m honored, but I’m humbled,” she said in a Chapman Partnership video in 2015 that paid tribute to her own role in striving to make Miami a better, more inclusive place.

First, she did so in the background, as she helped raise their two children. Later, she was the engine driving the Chapman name and mission. Many leaders have said of Chapman that “she was the woman behind the man” and that she was “his strength.”

The Humanitarian of the Year video tribute noted that Chapman was “as effective and efficient at leading as Alvah was but in a different way.”

She has said she did it to honor the man who “was the love of my life.”

In key ways, Alvah never left Betty. And Alvah wasn’t wholly Alvah without Betty.

When she was presented the Humanitarian Award that carries his name she accepted it, “because I felt in my heart Alvah would want me to do this this year,” she said in the tribute video. “It’s a very special award to me because it’s named for him and I think it’s what he’d like for me to do.”

Trish Bell, Chairman Emeritus of Chapman Partnership, said in announcing the award: “Betty Chapman is a true humanitarian in every sense of the word and I believe Alvah would be proud to have her be the recipient of this award that so represents his values, generosity and passion for helping those throughout our community who are the most vulnerable.”

Bell called her “a selfless role model.”

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David Lawrence Jr., chair of The Children’s Movement of Florida and former Miami Herald publisher, paid tribute to Betty at the top of his speech at the first annual [Alvah H. Chapman Jr. Leadership Lecture at Florida International University](#) in September 2012.

“None of us — and Alvah Chapman would be the first to say this — achieves anything alone. Betty Chapman is as good an example as I know of a supportive, collaborative partner. She reminds me of my own mother — short in stature, great in goodness. In my own growing-up-and-beyond family, all nine of us Lawrence children would have told you that my father was the ‘strong one’ in our home. But in my mother’s widowhood of 20 years, we discovered that our mother was much stronger than we thought — full of extraordinary faith and the greatest values. That, too, is Betty Chapman,” Lawrence Jr. said.

HELPING MIAMI’S HOMELESS

In 1993, the Miami-Dade County Commission and the Board of Community Partnership for Homeless named the Alvah H. Chapman, Jr., and Betty B. Chapman Center, a place to assist the homeless. The couple’s work on behalf of those in need became glaringly apparent after Hurricane Andrew devastated South Miami-Dade in August 1992. President George H.W. Bush called on Alvah to gather community leaders in what became the We Will Rebuild effort.

Betty was one of those leaders. This work, in part, led to the [Chapman Partnership](#). In 1994, the Chapmans donated \$500,000 to help build homeless shelters.

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File photo of Alvah and Betty Chapman. Ray Fisher *Miami Herald* File

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Betty said the idea to commit themselves to helping the city's homeless started at a Bible-study class in 1992. The desire had germinated when they moved from their home near downtown Miami to Coconut Grove. During Alvah's commute, he passed homeless encampments set up under the highway. At that Bible-study class he announced he was going to tap his leadership skills to put them to good use. But he'd need her support.

He said to her, "Betty! We've got to do something about this," she told the Miami Herald in 2009.

"I said, if Alvah is going to do that then I'll be his helper because that's what I've always been," Chapman said in the Chapman Partnership's 2015 Humanitarian of the Year video presentation.

BATTLIN' BETTY

Betty Chapman was born Betty Bateman on Sept. 15, 1920, in Macon, Georgia. She inspired the naming of an aircraft, "Battlin' Betty," thanks to her relationship with the man who would become her husband of some 65 years. The two wed just before he shipped overseas as pilot of a World War II B-17 bomber.

In 1960, the Chapmans moved to Miami when Alvah joined the Knight organization at the Herald. He helped lead the merger that formed Knight Ridder. He retired in 1989 as chairman of Knight Ridder and he died on Christmas Day at age 87 in 2008.

According to a profile of Alvah Chapman in Mike Blackwell's 2003 book, "[Remember Now Thy Creator in The Days of Thy Youth, The Religious Heritage of The Citadel](#)," Betty was by his side — if not physically but as an inspiration —

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when, in 1944, as part of the 401st Bomb Division in an operation in Leipzig, Germany, he piloted that hobbled B-17 aircraft, with its two engines shot out and damaged brakes, to strike “the greatest blow yet to German aircraft production.” The newlywed christened the aircraft, “Battlin’ Betty.”

HONORS

Decades later, Betty Chapman’s name was comfortably attached to buildings because of her — or their — community efforts, philanthropy and leadership. The Betty B. Chapman Student Plaza at Florida International University’s Modesto A. Maidique campus was dedicated in 2001, in honor of her indefatigable support of FIU.



Alvah Chapman, Betty Chapman, and FIU President Mark Rosenberg at an event on FIU’s campus to raise funds for a future art museum. This file photo is from April 1999.
Lilly Echeverria *Miami Herald* File

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There's the 7,600-square-foot Betty and Alvah Chapman Conference Center, dedicated in 1997 at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus. The Chapmans championed Miami Dade College, too.

Padrón, who will step down from the college's presidency after serving in the role since 1995, admired her for the causes she championed. These, he said, included her staunch support of a free press, the homeless, education and the arts. The conference center named for the Chapmans on Miami Dade's campus "is the most used facility in the entire campus," Padrón noted.

That could be, in part, because Betty Chapman's presence was so familiar and warm among the campus community. She supported the Miami Film Festival and Miami Book Fair, two major cultural institutions Miami Dade College helped grow under Padrón's tenure as president.

"She has been a gem and a treasure and someone I know will be greatly missed," Padrón said. "Until the last moment she has been so involved and so supportive of different things that we at the college feel privileged to have her involved with us in more than one dimension."

The Homeless Assistance Center at 1550 N. Miami Ave. also carries the Chapmans' names.

And the couple championed Barry University, as well.

In 1987, Barry bestowed its prestigious Laudare Award., its highest award, to Alvah and Betty Chapman for their personal contributions to the school and the community. Twenty years later, in 2007, the Chapmans received a Lifetime Achievement Award at the National Philanthropy Day Luncheon in Miami.

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Through 65 years of marriage, and for the next 10 years of her life, Chapman supported, and then built upon, her husband's civic accomplishments, all the while guiding her own solo civic endeavors.

She was ever inquisitive, eager to learn. Always.

"She was among the finest, most generous people I ever met. And one of the most optimistic," said Alberto Ibargüen, CEO of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and a former Miami Herald publisher.

"One day I called Alvah and Betty answered the phone. El Nuevo Herald had just won the Ortega y Gasset Prize for Spanish language journalism and Betty said she had told Alvah that she thought, 'If Knight Ridder has one of the best Spanish language papers in the world, then maybe we ought to learn to speak and read Spanish.' Betty reported that Alvah said, 'Betty, I think our Spanish-learning days are over!' But Betty still thought it was a good idea, to change with the world and always be part of it," Ibargüen said.

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Former Miami Herald publisher Alberto Ibarguen, Betty Chapman and Armando Codina in a 2011 file photo.

SERGIO ALSINA *El Nuevo Herald File*

She was also a member of the Junior League and the AK Chapter of the Philanthropic Educational Organization.

In addition to the Chapman Partnership's 2015 Humanitarian distinction, her own work drew honors, including the 2013 Change Agent Award from the Miami-Dade County Homeless Trust.

Chapman's survivors include her daughters Chris Hilton and Dale Chapman Webb, six grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren.

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/obituaries/article226217425.html>

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Erna Kaplan, Alvah Chapman, Betty Chapman at a reception for Friends of the Art Museum. DANIEL PORTNOY MIAMI HERALD FILE

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