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Warren Hellman, financier and philanthropist, dies at 7

David R. Baker, Chronicle Staff Writer

Sunday, December 18, 2011

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Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Warren Hellman plays banjo with the Wranglers at this year's Hardly Strictly Bluegrass festival in Golden Gate Park. Hellman founded the annual festival in 2001.

Warren Hellman, the San Francisco financier whose willingness to fund an unlikely range of passions made him a force in Bay Area politics, education and music, died Sunday evening from complications of leukemia, his family said. He was 77.

Public services are planned for Wednesday at Congregation Emanu-El in San Francisco and will be followed within a few weeks by a community celebration of Mr. Hellman's life, his family said.

Mr. Hellman built a fortune as an investor and seemed determined to spend much of it. Co-founder of the Hellman & Friedman private-equity firm, he poured money into local causes, some political, some personal.

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And in 2001, Mr. Hellman sponsored a free, outdoor concert devoted to bluegrass music, a love he had nurtured for years.

Since then, the Hardly Strictly Bluegrass festival has grown into an annual three-day event drawing more than 300,000 people to Golden Gate Park. It is still free, with costs covered by an endowment that Hellman - an amateur banjo player - created to ensure that the festival would continue "after I croak," he said.

His daughter Patricia Hellman Gibbs confirmed Sunday that "yes, the Hardly Strictly

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Bluegrass festival will go on!"

"He was truly a Renaissance man, excelling in so many aspects of life," she said. "He was a phenomenally successful businessman, a lifelong competitive athlete, a community leader, a dedicated musician, and fiercely devoted to his family. He and Mom were the yin and yang that made our family whole, complementary to each other in so many ways."

Mr. Hellman seemed to enjoy talking about his philanthropy more than his business deals, and often said that collecting expensive cars or art didn't interest him.

"What does move me is the philanthropic stuff," he told Forbes magazine in 2006.

"Giving really does move me. Part of it is selfish. It's fun to be appreciated. But the other part is that good things really are growing."

He called the bluegrass festival a "selfish gift," one that he, the musicians and the community could all enjoy.

"How could you have more fun than that?" he told Forbes. "What the hell is money for if it isn't for something like that?"

Part of Golden Gate Park will bear his name as a result. The San Francisco Recreation and Park Commission recently agreed to rename Speedway Meadow, the center of the festival, as Hellman Hollow.

Mr. Hellman learned of the name change last week, said his son, Mick Hellman. "It meant a ton to him," he said. "He was incredibly gratified."

'Utmost effort'

Although he was born in New York City, Mr. Hellman's personality displayed a distinctly Californian combination: laid-back in some respects, relentless in others.

He competed in extreme sports and at one point finished a 100-mile race in the Sierra after falling and breaking a rib at mile 25. Known for a casual wardrobe frayed with use, his financial acumen helped build Hellman & Friedman into a powerhouse of the buyout business.

The company made its name taking jeans-maker Levi Strauss & Co. private in 1985, a \$1.6 billion transaction that at the time was the largest-ever buyout of a publicly held U.S. firm. In 2001, Hellman & Friedman purchased a 15 percent ownership stake in the Nasdaq stock market, expanding the stake in 2005 and selling it for considerable profit in 2007.

"Warren is very strong-willed," Mr. Hellman's wife of 56 years, Chris, told The Chronicle in 2001. "He doesn't like not doing well at something, so he just absolutely puts the utmost effort into everything."

New York roots

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rmaris 8:12 PM on December 18, 2011

Farewell Mr. Hellman. You leave a legacy of kindness and generosity. Thank you.

REPLY (80) (4) POPULARITY: 76

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jfm 8:11 PM on December 18, 2011

Thank You Warren!, Hardly Strictly Bluegrass is an amazing gift to the city, and to music lovers. Long Live HSBG!

REPLY (70) (4) POPULARITY: 66

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slcuper 8:11 PM on December 18, 2011

Thanks for your legacy and contributions. I'll be strolling in 'Hellman Hollow' sometime very soon whistling to some bluegrass.

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