

Column: Founder of Aurora Christian Schools left a legacy of service

By DENISE CROSBY
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Aurora Christian founder Paul House, who died Friday at age 81, is shown in a 2008 photo at the groundbreaking of the school's new football stadium. (Jim Gibson / HANDOUT)

FEEDBACK

On Friday afternoon, the world lost a strong leader and the heavens gained a humble servant.

I don't know how else to begin a column about the death of 81-year-old Rev. Paul House, who until the end, remained active with the Aurora school he founded in 1975 and who never stopped working for Christian education, not just here in the Fox Valley but around the globe.

In fact, he was leading the devotions at Aurora Christian Schools' recent board meeting when he became so ill that two days later he was admitted to Rush Copley Medical Center, according to daughter Collette House.



Paul House, founder of Aurora Christian Schools, died Friday at age 81.
(Collette House / HANDOUT)

Battling a recurring urinary tract infection, Paul also tested positive for COVID-19 and was eventually intubated as his body could not withstand all that was being thrown at it.

After he suffered a heart attack, “My dad is with Jesus!!!” Collette texted to family and friends Friday afternoon.

His death also means “the Christian school movement has lost a giant,” posted Jeff Mattner, midAmerica regional director of the Association of Christian Schools International, on House’s obituary page.

“But at this moment,” Mattner continued, “he would encourage us to keep moving forward in the work to which we have been called.”

Encouraging - a word used frequently when describing this beloved Christian educator.

And wise.

Kind.

Humorous.

And humble.

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One of the stories also shared included the day a new family, who met him as the superintendent was picking up scraps of paper in the hallway and thought he was the janitor, got a tour of the school by the founder without him ever revealing who he was.

“No one was more surprised with how God used Paul than Paul,” said Aurora Christian Schools’ parent and leader Jim Gibson, whose late father Keith was a founding board member. “There are far too many stories to share, far too many miracles to explain.”

The first of which would be how this youth pastor with three young children started a school that began in a rented church space on Claim Street in Aurora and grew to its current 26-acre, 164,000 square-foot campus on Sullivan Road - a second location was added last year in Sycamore - that boasts an enrollment of 675 students from preschool through grade 12.

Drive past the ACS main campus and you will immediately see another of those miracles: a state-of-the-art football field that started as a rocky piece of ground and within a couple of years, thanks to the tireless efforts of ACS friends and family, became home to the city's first state football

“He was a visionary,” said Aurora University head football coach Don Beebe, who was with Aurora Christian for 14 years and led the Eagles to those back-to-back titles. “Paul was a man who stepped out on faith and who had a heart for kids and the Lord that epitomizes what every man and woman should strive for.”

Some victories, of course, were more hard-fought than others.

During that same time ACS was bringing gridiron glory to Aurora, the land-rich, cash-poor school suddenly found itself struggling to keep doors open after the bank that held the loan on the Sullivan Road building refused to renew it following the real estate bust of 2007.

Facing a lawsuit and the possibility of shuttered doors, Aurora Christian Schools was saved after a man in Florida, who heard about the school's dilemma and believed in its mission, contacted sources that eventually led to a friendly lender from the East Coast who committed to pulling a new loan together following a tour of the Aurora campus.

Paul and his supporters never stopped believing in the power of prayer and of people, especially ACS parents who refused to pull their kids out, even when things looked bleak, because they too believed in miracles.

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Over the years I've had the privilege of chronicling some of those come-from-behinds. And every time I talked to House, I came away thinking we are the ones blessed to have this man living and working in our community.

Even after his retirement in 2010, Paul continued to play an active role at ACS, teaching Bible classes and working closely with the board. Which is why “it's only fitting,” noted Collette House, who took over as superintendent from her dad, that his “last actions in this world were at one of those meetings.”

Paul House grew up on the family's chicken ranch in Hollister, California, but early on felt a calling to the church. After receiving his degree in Christian education, he became a youth pastor and launched a construction outreach program called Mission Impossible that he would later resurrect at his next – and last – stop in Aurora.



Paul House speaks to volunteers from Aurora Christian Schools during an evening devotion at a Mission Impossible construction trip. (Collette House / HANDOUT)

Hired by First Presbyterian Church as youth and education director, Paul, along with Loretta, his soul mate and wife of 61 years, arrived here in 1971. Because there was no Christian school in the area for their three daughters to attend, the couple decided a few years later to start one. And within a year of its opening, Aurora Christian Schools more than doubled its enrollment and more than quadrupled it by year three.

After moves from Claim Street to Illinois Avenue to Blackhawk Drive - with families picking up paintbrushes and supplying the labor - the school moved into its current

location in 2004 after obtaining critical zoning changes from the city.

One of the reasons Aurora Mayor David Stover agreed to this request, recalls former board member Gibson, was because he was so pleased Paul insisted the name stay Aurora Christian Schools, despite the city's not-so-great reputation at the time.

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“Paul loved Aurora and the people who live here,” said Gibson.

That included the Rev. Andy Morgan, who recently retired as pastor of River Valley Community Church and who met Paul when he was 24 years old and just starting his spiritual journey.

“He took me under his wing and mentored me,” said 71-year-old Morgan, adding that House also helped him start River Valley Community by allowing the church to meet rent free in the school when it was on Illinois Avenue.

Paul and ACS also provided the credibility and seed money that helped launch Parkview Christian Academy in Yorkville, which has continued to grow enrollment since it was founded in 1997.

“He was all about how can I help someone else succeed,” said Morgan. “He was just so authentic in his commitment to faith, to family, to community and to kids.”

Even though Paul always felt that God had called him to this area, his reach extended far beyond these borders. One of the last times I spoke with him, around the school’s 40th anniversary in 2012, he’d just returned from mission work in Ukraine as chairman of Global Committee for the Association of Christian Schools International, which covers 17,000 schools in over 90 countries.

Plus, those Mission Impossible trips - whether for hurricane relief or building schools in impoverished areas - took him and hundreds of ACS parents and kids to many different parts of the United States.

One thing heard repeatedly is that this humble man always wanted to direct all attention to others. Which means Paul House would likely not be that comfortable with his visitation ACS will host from 2 to 5 p.m. May 28.

But he’d likely love the celebration that will follow at the stadium because it will have a “family reunion” feel to it, according to his daughter. There’s no way he’d rather mark his “heavenly homecoming” than with an “Aurora homecoming” for the school he gave nearly 50 years of his life to, she said.

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Plus, the founder would appreciate the attention to ACS, which is trying to find a way to take advantage of a financial incentive its friendly lender is offering to pay off the remaining debt early.

In the last weeks of his life, House was indeed praying for one more miracle. Eliminating this debt would not only secure the future of the school, more importantly it would allow ACS to lower tuitions that, in turn, would serve more families.

As he said during the ceremony when the school turned over the first shovels of dirt for that new football stadium, “Let’s all do our part and it will happen...”

“That was Paul’s heart,” said Gibson, “building strong foundations in children through a Christcentered education.”

“His was always a commitment to service,” added Morgan, “which is why his legacy will live on forever.”

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