



The late Richard Kaufman, one of the founders of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute. Submitted photo

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Kaufman lived a youthful life until his death at age 91



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The Kaufman Interfaith Institute reached a high at its recent triennial Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue just a couple of weeks ago, only to be plunged into shock with the news of the sudden death of one of its founders, Richard Kaufman.

Our daylong dialogue had featured three outstanding speakers whose interaction was described by one participant as the "best dialogue we've had." Dick Kaufman was excited about the event, entertained the speakers for dinner and enjoyed every minute. If you had the privilege of talking with him that day, you saw his energy and intellectual stimulation that reflected his own study and commitment to a deeper understanding of his Jewish faith. At age 91, Dick was in the final stages of completing his doctorate at the University of Aberdeen in Scotland. He had recently completed his master's degree at the University of Chicago Divinity School.

Following his stepping down as president of Amstore in 1994, Dick did not slow down, but continued active business involvement as board chair and with his wife, Sylvia, pursued philanthropy, travel, and interfaith activity. They founded the Sylvia and Richard Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University, endowed the president's position at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, and served on the board of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago.

He was physically fit with daily exercise and skiing in Aspen each winter. His intellectual curiosity led him to pursue advanced degrees and was getting ready to defend his dissertation for the Ph.D. degree. Thus we were grieved to learn of the accident that led to his death only two weeks following his lively and vigorous interaction at the interfaith dialogue.

Both Dick and Sylvia lived most of their adult life in the Muskegon area and belonged to Temple B'Nai Israel, where Rabbi Alan Alpert has served for more than 40 years. Rabbi Alpert told me of the practice in the Kaufman family for the couple to share blessings with each other on the Sabbath. It included the passage from Proverbs about the blessings of a virtuous woman. The passage continues:

*"Her value is far beyond that of pearls.
Her husband trusts her from his heart,
and she will prove a great asset to him.
She works to bring him good, not harm,
all the days of her life." (Proverbs 31:10-12)*

The other blessing they shared, from the Psalms, includes the following:

*"Happy is the man loyal to God, who greatly
delights in the Eternal One's commandments!
His descendants will be honored in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.*

His household prospers, and his righteousness endures forever.

*Light dawns in the darkness for the upright,
for the man who is gracious, merciful and just.*

His mind is firm, trusting in the Eternal One.

His heart is steady, he is not afraid.

He has been generous, has given freely to the poor.

His righteousness endures forever; his life is exalted in honor." (Psalm 112)

Both of these passages from the Hebrew Bible are fitting descriptions of these two outstanding members of our community. Their faith, their character, and their many contributions to the West Michigan community and beyond, are recognized and appreciated.

Dick was respected in business, committed to his wife and family, and always ready to learn. His health, vigor, and intellectual curiosity continued into his 90s. It was another Jewish businessman, writing over 100 years ago, who described his understanding of what it meant to be truly young. His poem "Youth" was made famous by Gen. Douglas MacArthur, who often quoted it and had a framed copy of the poem in his Tokyo office.

Samuel Ullman who lived from 1840 to 1924, was not only successful in business but was active serving as a lay rabbi in his city's reform congregation, Temple Emanu-El in Alabama. His poem includes the following lines:

YOUTH
by Samuel Ullman

"Youth is not a time of life; it is a state of mind; it is not a matter of rosy cheeks, red lips and supple knees; it is a matter of the will, a quality of the imagination, a vigor of the emotions; it is the freshness of the deep springs of life.

"Youth means a temperamental predominance of courage over timidity of the appetite, for adventure over the love of ease. ... Nobody grows old merely by a number of years. We grow old by deserting our ideals.

"Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul. Worry, fear, self-distrust bows the heart and turns the spirit back to dust.

"...There is in every human being's heart the lure of wonder, the unfailing child-like appetite of what's next, and the joy of the game of living. In the center of your heart and my heart there is a wireless station; so long as it receives messages of beauty, hope, cheer, courage and power from others and from the Infinite, so long are you young."

By this standard, Dick Kaufman died as a young 91-year-old.

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