

# Valley philanthropist John F. Long dies at 87

**Charles Kelly**

The Arizona Republic

Feb. 29, 2008 06:34 AM



John F. Long, a hard-working developer and philanthropist who built Maryvale, donated land for schools, community centers and parks and had a profound effect on West Valley growth, died this morning. He was 87.

Long is best known for creating Maryvale, a master-planned community in west Phoenix that was the first such development in Arizona when it was begun in 1954. He was a force in the West Valley when growth in that area was focused more on west Phoenix than on now-booming cities such as Glendale, Peoria and Avondale.

He died at 12:30 a.m. of congestive heart failure while under hospice care in Phoenix.

"I am deeply saddened to lose not only my boss, but my mentor both in business and in life, my friend and my father figure for the last 32 years," said Jim Miller, director of real estate for John F. Long Properties.

"John was the most remarkable man on so many levels. We have all benefited by John's life-time commitment to affordable housing and his generous spirit of giving back so much to the community."

Funeral services will be held March 10, but specific arrangements are pending.

Long had been in an assisted living facility for about three months, but continued to be mentally sharp, according to Miller.

In fact, Long had attended a birthday party for an employee of the business only a month before

he passed away, Miller said.

"I didn't see any difference in his mental capacity at all," Miller said. "He was as alert and as funny as he always was. He told stories and details of events 40-50 years ago."

For more than half a century, Long donated money, land and construction services to a number of causes, including affordable housing, rehabilitation for alcoholics, and filling potholes for more than 550 miles of Phoenix streets.

Long was active even late in life, overseeing the business of John F. Long Properties, which has begun development of Algodon Center, a business park expected to stretch over a thousand acres in the West Valley, wrangling with city officials, and continuing to boost charities with timely gifts of land and money.

The developer, honored by the Arizona Historical Society in 2001 as a "historymaker," didn't shy away from a fight.

Among other struggles, he challenged the building of what is now University of Phoenix Stadium in Glendale by arguing that the sports authority that decided on the site was illegally created. Long, whose offer of free land for the stadium had been rejected, ultimately lost that legal battle.

He also sued Glendale to try to bar development on land he had donated for a second runway for the city's airport. In 2005, Glendale settled the suit by agreeing to preserve space for a second runway for 20 years.

Long was born in Phoenix on May 17, 1920, the first son of German immigrant parents who came to the Valley in the 1910s, met and married. Long milked cows and performed other labor during his youth on his family's farm, hard work that he said conditioned him for the "real world."

"We didn't have much, and so I never expected much," he said.

After graduating from Glendale High School in 1939, he rode the rails for a while looking for work, then served as an engine mechanic on B-17s and B-24s in the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II, eventually seeing duty in Italy.

After he was discharged from the service in October 1945, Long teamed with his father and brother in the H.B. Long & Sons construction company, but high costs gobbled up their profits on 11 custom homes.

Long then briefly formed a landscaping business with a cousin, Steve Roer, but it was only moderately successful. With what he made in that venture, Long bought a lot on North 23rd Avenue in Phoenix and an option on two adjoining lots.

After Long married Mary Tolmachoff on May 29, 1947, his next homebuilding effort set him on

the path to success. Long and his wife decided to build a home for themselves on the lot they owned. In six months, putting in 16- to 18-hour days, the Longs, working side by side, finished the home, having spent \$4,000 on materials. A surprise buyer for the home appeared, offering \$8,400, and Long accepted.

With his profit, he decided to build on the two adjoining lots, and his homebuilding business took off.

"When prospects approached, John would put down his tools, brush a hand at his clothes and lean over a pickup's fender to transact business," says *Arizona Men of Achievement, Vol. 1*.

As the business grew, Long's wife began keeping the firm's books and driving their truck.

In 1954, Long started the Maryvale development, named for his wife, using efficient homebuilding techniques that saved time and labor. Because of the cost-saving, Long was able to offer a three-bedroom, two-bath house with a swimming pool for less than \$10,000. Soon his houses were selling at the rate of 100 a week an average of six months before completion.

After building thousands of homes there, he was cited in 1958 for community development by *Practical Builder*, a leading national trade magazine.

The year before, because of his philanthropy, Long had been named Citizen of the Year by a group of prominent Phoenix businessmen.

His public-spirited approach took many forms.

When one of the three school districts in Maryvale got near capacity but was unable to build more schools because of legal spending limits, Long constructed 48 classrooms on his own land at his own expense and rented them to the district for a nominal fee.

When the county was strapped for money to improve 12½ acres he had donated for parks and recreation, Long built a 50-meter Olympic-size swimming pool at his own expense and gave the county the option to buy it at half its market value.

As a builder, Long was known as an innovator devoted to efficiency and frugal energy and water use.

According to his company, he was the first builder in the country to use plastic pipe in houses and the first in the state to use roof trusses instead of rafters. He sometimes designed and built his own equipment to further improvements in construction methods, such as the pouring of continuous curbs and sidewalks.

In 1988, John F. Long Homes was chosen by the U.S. Department of Energy to develop and build a demonstration model home featuring roof-mounted photovoltaic solar cells. The experiment led to the construction of Solar One, the world's first solar subdivision, with all electricity provided by ground-mounted solar cells.

The subdivision also used an updated version of "rammed earth" construction, which had been used by the ancient Hohokam people. Long's crews mixed desert earth with Portland cement, wet it and rammed it between forms. When the mixture hardened, it formed a stone-like material that held heat in the winter and stayed cool in the summer.

Over the years, Long served on the Phoenix City Council, the Maricopa County Board of Health, as a trustee for the Glendale Union High School District and on numerous boards and committees.

In 1996, Arizona State University awarded him an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters for 50 years of public service. And in 2000, he received the first Lifetime Achievement Award from Westmarc for his contributions to the life of western Maricopa County.

Long's wife, Mary, passed away in 1998. He is survived by his children, Manya, Shirley and Jake; by four grandchildren, Jamie, Dan, Matt and Arron; and by one great-grandson, Abe.