

George Christopoulos: 'UW, Wyoming are my life'

BY DEBRA BAKER BECK

Neither the glamour of lucrative job offers over the years nor the possibility of escaping to a warmer climate in retirement have ever lured distinguished alumnus George Christopoulos (BS '50) from the state he loves so much. "The state of Wyoming and the University of Wyoming are my life, and I wouldn't want it any other way," the Cheyenne native says. "We have a pretty well-kept secret, really. We may not have everything, but we sure have a lot more than most places."

That strong belief—and his older brother's influence—drew Christopoulos to the University of Wyoming when the time came to choose an institution of higher education. It's also a major reason why all four of his children attended UW.

"I told my kids they could go anywhere they wanted—as long as it was Wyoming," he says with a broad smile.

Christopoulos chooses to enjoy his retirement in the city where he grew up and where he spent his entire professional life. After serving in the infantry in World War II and graduating from the University of Wyoming, he started his career at the Wyoming Highway Department. There he worked in the right of way and road design departments until he was called to serve in the Korean Conflict. When Christopoulos returned to Cheyenne, he again worked briefly for the Highway Department and a private contractor before he joined the State Engineer's Office staff. He started at the bottom of the organizational chart in 1953 and retired at the top, as Wyoming's state engineer.

Water issues dominated his work there, from the early days as a deputy state engineer and then as state engineer until his retirement in 1987. Because water is such a critical resource, it acts as a lightning rod for conflict—even when water isn't the real issue. Christopoulos became adept at mediating disagreements and helping negotiate compromises that best serve the interests of everyone involved.

Frequently, he found himself in the middle of "neighborhood squabbles," one-on-one disagreements between ranchers or groups regarding water use.

"I tried to listen to both sides, then point out some sort of a solution," he says. "I figured in the long haul, we were better off trying to get the problem settled rather than continuing to deal with it."

Through the office's interstate work, Christopoulos gained a broader perspective of water issues. Over the years, he represented Wyoming in numerous water groups, such as the Western States Water Council, the Colorado River Water Users Association and the Colorado River Basin Salinity Control Forum. His ability to balance conflicting demands came in handy as he worked with colleagues from other states to avoid conflict and try to meet everyone's needs.

"It's a fascinating tug of war," he says of efforts to balance upstream and downstream users' interests while also considering environmental concerns.

As Wyoming's representative, Christopoulos regularly joined with counterparts in other Western states to advocate the West's interests as Congress debated legislation affecting water. He recalls many intense discussions between the state and federal governments about water allocation and other water issues.

Water is never a dull topic. Christopoulos recalls being involved in debates on the coal slurry pipeline in the 1980s; Wyoming's instream flow bill; and two lawsuits involving the state of Wyoming, one with Wyoming's Indian tribes regarding Reservation water entitlements and one (still ongoing) with the state of Nebraska regarding use of water from the North Platte River system.



GEORGE CHRISTOPOULOS

Christopoulos predicts battles will continue to revolve around use and maintaining Wyoming's rights to water for the future. The "use it or lose it" philosophy applies to water, he says. If the state doesn't use what it has by compact, it could lose that use in the future to other states with no guarantee that it would be returned.

Negotiating in a New Arena

Christopoulos' mediation skills haven't had time to get rusty since retirement. Five years ago, Gov. Mike Sullivan appointed him to the State Employees and Officials Group Health Insurance Board of Administration. Christopoulos chaired that board for four years; currently, he serves as vice chairman.

This board sets health insurance policy, premiums and benefits for all state employees and for state retirees. Taking on that responsibility was "kind of like jumping from the frying pan into the fire," according to Christopoulos.

Of the current health care debate, Christopoulos says he worries about too much federal interference.

"I think we can handle our own problems," he says. "We can deal with them a lot better at the local level."

He says, however, that while some of the problems are national in scope and might need a nudge from Congress, he does not feel that the entire system needs to be revamped.

A Man of Integrity

Christopoulos' nominators frequently mentioned his integrity and strength of character. He credits his parents with instilling a strong sense of values in him and his seven siblings.

His father had a simple philosophy:

"He said, 'I want you to be a fighter. Don't let anybody push

you around. But if somebody does you wrong and you can't do anything about it, just leave it to God. Don't hate, don't hold grudges. Just keep everything on an even keel.' The more you hate and the more you hold grudges, the more it hurts you. You're the loser."

That's good advice that Christopoulos passes on to his children and grandchildren. He also tells them to continually give their best.

"The way you compete in life is to always put out 110 percent, no matter what you're doing, then let the chips fall where they may," he says. He has tried to pass on this philosophy to all of his children.

Christopoulos tells a story about his son, Dan, that illustrates the importance he places on striving for excellence.

As a child, Dan longed to follow in his brother Lou's footsteps and play sports; but a congenital heart condition kept him on the sidelines until the eighth grade, when he convinced his doctor that he could become a place kicker.

And kick he did, right into the Wyoming record books.

Those records didn't come easy. At one point in the 1977 season, Dan struggled and the coach benched him for two games. But following his dad's advice, he didn't give up. Instead, he kept working at it, had a great practice and told his coaches that he was ready to kick in the next game against Colorado State.

Dan's perseverance paid off. He kicked a record five field goals against CSU, the last one a 62-yarder that Dan—and his dad in the stands—knew was good the moment it left his foot. As Dan's teammates carried him off the field, his father celebrated heartily for the young man who continued to overcome great adversity.

(By the way, that 62-yard kick still stands as the longest ever by a Cowboy; and the five-field goal game stood as a record until 1990.)

Christopoulos' interest in Wyoming football increased significantly when Dan and Lou played, but he's always been a Cowboy. The Christopoulos family has had season football tickets since the 1950s, and he has held season basketball tickets off and on for nearly as many years.

He does admit to one bad habit.

"I'm a terrible referee baiter," he says. "But that's in the heat of battle. None of those refs ever see it quite the way I do!"

Christopoulos loves to see his Cowboys succeed.

"I have such a drive to see Wyoming win," he says. "Of course, when it's over it's over. But during the game, I get pretty excited about it."

University Service

Christopoulos' interest in the university also extends to the classroom. As state engineer, he frequently made presentations to agriculture, engineering and law classes about various water issues. He is a longtime donor to several UW programs, and he served on the College of Agriculture Advisory Board. Christopoulos is a member of the Cowboy Joe Club and the UW Alumni Association.

As a student, he participated in Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity and Phi Epsilon Phi. He also was on the Dean's Honor Roll several times.

He and his wife, Esther, have four children, all UW alumni: Elaine Jacobs of Casper, Adrienne Johansen of Cheyenne, Lou Christopoulos of Houston, and Dan Christopoulos of Minneapolis.