George Christopulos: ‘UW, Wyoming are my life’

BY DEBRA BAKER BECK

Neither the glamour of lucrative job offers over the years nor the possibility of accepting a warmer climate in retirement have overtured distinguished alumus George Christopulos 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 Christopulos 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 to. As long as it was Wyoming,’ he says with a broad smile.

Christopulos 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 Christopulos 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 dramatized his work there, from the early days as 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. Christopulos became adept at mediating disagreements and helping navigate 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 used to listen on both sides, then go out on a limb with a solution,’ he says. ‘Occasionally, we were better off trying to get the problem settled rather than continuing to deal with it.

Through the office’s interest in water, Christopulos 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 Study Coordination 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 part of life,’ he says, ‘but it requires the ability to balance upstream and downstream users’ interests while also considering environmental concerns.

As Wyoming’s representative, Christopulos regularly joined with counterparts in other states to advocate the West’s interests at Congress in debates 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. Christopulos recalls being involved in debates on the coal slurry pipeline in the 1980s. Wyoming’s interstate flow bill and two lawsuits involving the state of Wyoming, one with Wyoming’s Indian tribes regarding Reservation Water and another with the state of Nebraska regarding use of water from the North Platte River system.

Christopulos predicts battles will continue to revolve around use and maintaining Wyoming’s rights to water for the future. ‘One of our basic laws is that water is a public resource,’ he says. ‘It will be our job to see that the future so other states with no guarantee that it would be returned.

Negotiating in a New Arena

Christopulos’ mediation skills haven’t had time to run since retirement. Five years ago, Gov. Mike Sullivan appointed him to the State Employee and Officials Group Health Insurance Board of Administration. Christopulos 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 won’t ‘level the playing field from the fishing game into the future,’ according to Christopulos.

Of the current health care debate, Christopulos 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 audge from Congress, he does not feel that the entire system needs to be revamped.

A Man of Integrity

Christopulos’ nominations 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 on going in 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 Christopulos passes on to his children and grandchildren. He also tells them that they must go on to give their best.

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

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

At a child, Dan longed to follow his brother Lee’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 field goal against CSU, the last one a 62-yarder that Dan ‘and his dad in the stands, there was good for a moment in his little feet. As Dan’s mom strolled carried him off the field, his father elbowed hearty for the young man who continued to overcome great adversity.

(In the way that 62-yard kick still stands as the longest ever by a Cowboy and the field goal game stood as a record until 1962.)

Christopulos’ interest in Wyoming football extends significanly, when Dan and Lee played, but he’s always been a Cowboy. The Christopulos family has had season football tickets since the 1930s, and he’s held season tickets in the north end for nearly as many years.

And he does admit to one bad habit.

‘I’m a terrible referrer before,’ he says, ‘but that’s in the heat of battle. None of those refs ever in just the way I did.’

Christopulos loves to see our Cowboys succeed. ‘I’ve got a drive to see Wyoming win,’ he says. ‘Of course, when it’s over, I’m rooting for the games I am proud.

He does admit to one bad habit.

University Service

Christopulos’ interests in the university also extend to the classroom. As state engineer, he frequently made presentations to agricultural, engineering and law classes about various water issues. He is a long-time donor to several UW programs, and he served on the College of Agriculture Advisory Board. Christopulos is a member of the Cowboy Club and the UW Alumni Association.

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

He and his wife, Esther, have four children, all UW alumni—Blaine Joab of Casper, Adrienne Johnson of Cheyenne, Lori Christopulos of Houston, and Dan Christopulos of Minneapolis.