

"A Renaissance man":

Meet the recipient of the 2020 REDnews Lifetime Achievement Award

BY BRANDI SMITH

Hundreds of Houston real estate professionals gathered at the Briar Club on March 12 for the inaugural REDnews Awards, highlighting the best and brightest of our industry. You can check out the full list of finalists and winners on page 13, but the most significant award of the night went to John Walsh. We honored him with the Lifetime Achievement Award for his decades of service to the Houston community.

"I really wasn't surprised because John has not only been successful, but it's so well-deserved," said longtime friend Howard Tellepsen, CEO of Tellepsen Builders.

He and Walsh go back 50 years when the two attended Lamar High School together.

"He's very understated. He's very humble. I'm just so proud that he is receiving this lifetime achievement award," Tellepsen said. "I saw these characteristics of John in high school."

The pair graduated in 1962, going their separate ways. Walsh attended the University of Texas for undergrad, then received his MBA from the University of Houston before helping form Exxon's real estate subsidiary, Friendswood Development. It was in his role there that he helped create several master-planned communities, including Kingwood.

"I lived there back in the 1970s when I was in the Legislature," remembered Ed Emmett, who went on to serve as a Harris County judge for more than a decade. "It was a great place to raise a family. I think Friendswood deserves a lot of credit for creating that kind of a place to live."

Walsh didn't just create Kingwood; he raised his family there as well.

"It gives me a huge sense of pride to know my dad was such a big force in that," said Ryan Walsh, John's son and executive director of the Harris County Sports & Convention Corp. and NRG Park.



The younger Walsh called John a "great dad," but added that it was no secret to him or his sister that he loved what he did.

"We always joked that he worked six days a week at the office, then worked Sundays at the office at the house," said Ryan. "But he was always there for us. He was always at our recitals or sports events or school events. He always made a point to make sure he was there."

Now running a major organization himself, Ryan credited John being a shining example of how to be good at what you do while being a good person.

"Whether it was mowing the yard or cleaning your room or washing the dishes, he'd always say, 'You have to take pride in what you do,'" Ryan recalled. "I think he definitely takes pride in what he does. It shines through."

As brilliant as he was in his chosen field of real estate, Walsh's closest friends shared that he's incredibly creative and known for his love of poetry, photography and sketching.

"I guess you might say, in my opinion, John's like a Renaissance man," Tellepsen said with a smile. "He's a very special guy."

In his role as president of Friendswood, Walsh worked to make Houston a better place through communities such as Kingwood, Fairfield and Copperfield. That effort didn't stop when he stepped down in 1996.



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"He's always looking for the next adventure, looking for the next project," the younger Walsh said.

The next adventure came when he served as president of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, then in several of the chamber's leadership roles. When friend Bill White became Houston's mayor, White named Walsh deputy chief of staff for neighborhoods and housing.

"When we worked together for the city, John was hands-on in creating affordable housing for the city," said White. "He's done a lot of things in a way that does not shed light on himself. He always gives credit to others, which is why he's so effective."

It's hard to say which of Walsh's contributions to the Houston community were most substantial, but his next achievement is certainly a top contender. He accepted the challenge of creating a graduate real estate program in the University of Houston's Bauer College of Business.

"He had a vision for a practice-based program to educate the next generation of real estate professionals. He worked and worked and worked on that until it became a reality," said Mary Lawler, executive director of Avenue CDC, with whom Walsh has worked for many years.



"He researched all the other graduate real estate programs in the country and he took the best of all of those. He did all of this work, very thoroughly, for no salary," Tellepsen said. "His handprint is on that program. He started it from scratch. He raised money for it. He got an endowment that's going to help it go forward."

The endowment came from the family of Drew Alexander, CEO of Weingarten Realty Investors, which created the Stanford Alexander Center for Excellence in Real Estate.

"One of the things my father [Stanford] has always taught all of us and still teaches us every day is the importance of relationships," Alexander said. "That very much is the spirit John embraces, looking at things very collegially, trying to determine best practices, trying to get to a solution that's good for everyone."

Walsh assembled an advisory board that was a who's who of Houston real estate, including leaders such as Welcome Wilson Sr., Paul Layne, John Hammond, Lawler, Alexander and Tellepsen, who highlighted the program's lasting impact.

"With the training people get in the graduate program, they can further their careers in real estate here in Houston," he said.

For years, he served as director of the program before passing the reins. Now retired -- or as much as a "hands-on doer" like him can be -- he still serves on the advisory board, helping steer the ship he built.

"His whole life is an achievement, an achievement for this community," said White.

"John has done so much for the real estate profession, for the Houston community, so he is very much deserving of this honor," Lawler added.

Congratulations to our 2020 *REDnews* Lifetime Achievement Award winner, John Walsh! ■



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