

Centralia College's First President Dies at 95

Nels Hanson: Former President Grew Up in Chehalis, Served as President from 1966 to 1981

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Nels Hanson, a Chehalis native who served as Centralia College's first president from 1966 to 1981, has died at age 95.

Hanson died Sunday at Panorama, a retirement community in Lacey, after months of declining health, according to Julie Johnson of the Centralia College Foundation.

A graduate of Napavine High School in 1936, Hanson received his degree from Washington State University and moved to Randle, where he taught for 17 years. He started the Loggers' Jubilee in Morton and served as the grand marshal in the celebration's parade last year.

According to biographical information provided by the foundation, Hanson served as director of the Washington State Department of Science and Math until heading back to college again, this time in Stanford where he received a doctorate in education administration and finance.

Hanson then returned to the Evergreen State and became director of administration and finance for the state's community college system in 1963. In 1966, he became the first president of Centralia College.

According to the foundation, Hanson helped shape legislation that served to establish community colleges in Washington as a separate educational system, the state's Community College Act of 1967.

He led efforts to grow the numbers of students and courses offered across Community College District 12, which consisted of Centralia College, Olympia Technical College — which later became South Puget Sound Community College — and the Garrett Heyns Educational Program at the Washington State corrections facility in Shelton.

Johnson said Wednesday afternoon that Hanson, who over the years continued to be a visible presence at the college — especially during graduations — will be missed greatly.

"We're saddened because of the strong supporter he was of the foundation and the college," Johnson said. "He came to a lot of our events, and it was only in the last few months that his health started declining."

Hanson's last major public event he attended was an event dubbed "Class Act," a gathering of Centralia College's first three presidents on the same stage in February. A small crowd at the Phillip Wickstrom Studio Theatre listened as Hanson, Hank Kirk and James Walton spoke of their experiences at the college.

Hanson spoke of the hurdles the college faced as it went from an extension of Centralia High School to being recognized as a college during his time. He also mentioned how important it was for the college to put its best effort forth in ensuring graduates can compete for and gain needed employment.

"We're always being evaluated," Hanson said at the event. "We need to know how good our graduates are doing in the fields in which they are prepared for."

In the months since that event, Johnson said Hanson's health began to deteriorate.

"I would go up and see him periodically and noticed his health was declining," Johnson said.

One notable contribution from Hanson as president came in the late 1970s. Johnson said she recently received an email from a former college employee who remembered the president for ensuring there was a funding source for a continuing education program at Centralia College.

It was one of many contributions Hanson made that helped provide the foundation for the college as a standalone educational institution.

"He lived a good life," Johnson said. "He accomplished a lot and he will be sorely missed."

A memorial service for Hanson will take place Aug. 11 at 11 a.m. at the Methodist Church in Olympia, 1224 Legion Way S.E. In lieu of flowers, the public is asked to make donations to the Dr. Nels Hanson endowment fund at Centralia College that supports student scholarships.