

As I see it

By Ed Peterson, District 1

Looking back is a risky undertaking. The late Satchel Paige was right: “Don’t look back; something might be gaining on you.”

Despite the risk, here is a look back on a small part of the life of one of northeast Johnson County’s unsung heroes, who passed away in December.

Harold Bingham personified the qualities and values of the generation that built Johnson County. He and his wife, Sarah, purchased a lot and built a new home in 1940 in the developing area of Fairway. Leaving city life behind, they were warned by family members of the grave mistake they were making. They took this chance because they believed in opportunity and had an abiding faith. They raised their children, educated them in Shawnee Mission schools, and watched as they went on to lead successful lives.

Fast-forward to 1983, when my wife and I, as newlyweds, moved to Fairway in the hope of starting our own family. The Bingham family was well into retirement at that point. When my wife and I attended the neighborhood church, we met Harold and Sarah. Out of curiosity, we visited a Fairway City Council meeting, and there was Harold—the police commissioner! At the neighborhood carnival, Harold was in the middle of managing the children’s games.

As the years progressed, I had the good fortune of serving with Harold during my tenure on the City Council and as mayor. During that time, Harold was our conscience. When the council was ready to take swift action, Harold often would ask, “Have you thought about the other side of this?” Several poor decisions were thereby avoided, and Harold’s perspective was highly respected.

Harold was a mentor to many of us who were the second generation to inhabit Fairway. He was intentional about fulfilling this role, encouraging but not intrusive. A founder and builder of the neighborhood, he was instrumental in passing it on to a younger group. He wanted to see that we adopted the same degree of commitment and involvement with our neighborhood that his generation had used to create it. He took great delight in seeing young families take root in northeast Johnson County and witnessing their concern for strong education, public services, and neighborhoods.

My favorite memory of Harold pertains to a heated debate over whether to construct sidewalks, which had never been built in Fairway. The council chamber was full of angry residents, who were evenly divided. Toward the end of the debate, Harold calmly spoke of Fairway’s very early days and recalled the most contentious debate of those days—the decision about whether to put a traffic light at the intersection of Shawnee Mission Parkway and Mission Road. (That intersection now serves 40,000 cars per day and couldn’t function without a traffic signal.) Harold’s point was perfect: We have to move forward.

This spirit typifies those who built Johnson County, and it is no wonder that we enjoy such a legacy of great schools, strong neighborhoods, and high-quality services.

One of the most remarkable qualities about Harold was that even as he approached the age of 95, he seemed to be 59. He was always eagerly trying something new, creating opportunity, and looking forward. The wisdom that can be gleaned from this lifestyle is that Harold Bingham—like the Johnson County community he helped to build—never looked backward.

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