

NEWS • Obituary

Terry Geiling, Long Beach champion for military families, dies after fall at 83

Geiling, the former CEO for the Gold Star Manor, died on Saturday, July 30, a week after falling outside his home.



Terry Geiling holding one of the Naval ships he served on. (Photo courtesy of Fisher House Southern California)

Terry Geiling, a Long Beach community leader and champion for military families needing support at the VA's Gold Star Manor and Fisher House Southern California, has died. He was 83.

Geiling, the former CEO for the Gold Star Manor, died on Saturday, July 30, a week after falling outside his home.

"Terry suffered a serious cervical spine injury as the result of a fall," the family said in a statement, and did not regain consciousness after surgery."

Nancy Geiling, his wife of 59 years, said in an interview on Monday, Aug. 1, that her husband fell July 23 while tending to vegetables and flowers in his beloved garden in the front of their Belmont Heights home.

"He had a remarkable life that just ended too quickly," she said. A celebration of his life will be held later, she said.

Accolades on Geiling's remarkable life came pouring in from public officials and friends as word spread of his death.

"Terry was such an important member of the community, helping so many people in a variety of organizations," said Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia. "He leaves an enormous and incredible legacy."

Don Knabe, a former Los Angeles County Supervisor, said he was shocked by Geiling's death.

"Terry improved the lives of so many people who had grief in their hearts with the loss of loved ones," Knabe said. "I was working with him on expanding Fisher House in the Camp Pendleton area."

Alfredo Velasco, president of the Long Beach Rotary Club, called Geiling, “a Long Beach tour de force. He was an amazing human being who couldn’t say no when helping other people.”

Geiling served as Rotary president in 2006-07

Geiling connected Velasco with a Long Beach polio project in Mexico as part of Rotary’s goal to eradicate the disease worldwide, the current president said.

David H. Berger, commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps who worked with Geiling on many issues involving military families, called the community leader “a persistent, determined fighter focusing on caring for those unable to care for themselves. He was a champion for the little people. We could use more Terry Geilings in this world of ours.”

During his 11 years on the job as president and CEO of Long Beach’s Gold Star Manor from 2009 to 2020, Geiling oversaw completion of a major \$55 million renovation project of 348 apartments, which were badly in need of an overhaul.

The Gold Star Manor provides support and housing for seniors with ties to the military and mothers whose children died while serving in the Armed Forces.

When he got the job at the manor, the organization was one of the best-kept secrets in Long Beach, a little-known nonprofit that was not doing well financially. The manor’s site at 3021 Gold Star Drive, on Long Beach’s westside, was once used as a military barracks before being bought by American Gold Star Mothers in 1975; it initially served as affordable housing for seniors.

Gold Star Mothers formed after World War I when families hung gold stars in their windows to honor men and women killed in the war.

Geiling came in, formed partnerships with many organizations, developed a financial plan and built the manor into a nationally recognized housing facility for veterans and families. While he was overseeing that major project, Geiling also played a key role with the late U.S. Rep. Steve Kuykendall in developing and constructing a Fisher House at the VA Long Beach Healthcare System, on Seventh Street and Bellflower Avenue.

Fisher House Southern California provides housing to military and veteran families whose loved ones are at the Veterans Affairs medical center; there are also Fisher House facilities at Naval Hospital Camp Pendleton and Naval Medical Center San Diego.

Geiling retired from his position at the Gold Star Manor in January 2020.

But when Kuykendall died a year later, Geiling took over his position as president of Fisher House Southern California.

Linda Rahn, executive director of Fisher House Southern California, said Geiling had an endearing smile, a gentle style, loads of energy and great ideas.

“He was so passionate about helping veterans and their families,” Rahn said. “He understood the challenges of being in the military and the sacrifices that families had to make.”

Geiling’s passion for the military traces back to his early childhood in Chicago, where he was born Aug. 5, 1938, to Charles and Evelyn Geiling.

He came from a relatively poor family, with an agricultural background, that couldn’t afford to send him to college.

But Geiling wanted to go to college badly — something no one in his family had done — and he was able to get a Naval ROTC scholarship to the University of Illinois in Champaign, where he majored in agricultural science and graduated in 1960.

Geiling had many part-time jobs during that time, including washing dishes, waiting tables and handling house manager duties at his fraternity, Sigma Nu.

But one of his oddest jobs was working for a professor who was researching mosquitoes and how they mated. Female mosquitoes need blood to mate, so Geiling would take old toothbrush containers, cut a side out, put dozens of mosquitoes in them and tape the containers to his arm. The mosquitoes bit him and got the blood they needed. For that, he got paid 35 cents an hour.

The Navy, however, derailed Geiling’s plans for a job in agriculture.

When he graduated, his first assignment with the Navy brought him to the former Long Beach Naval Station, and then Submarine Officer's School in Groton, Connecticut. He never wanted to discuss the details of his submarine duty, saying only that it involved "gathering intelligence."

While in the Navy, he married Nancy Brown on Oct. 12, 1963. They have two children, Charles and Sara.

Geiling spent eight years on active duty and then stayed in the Naval Reserve. He took on jobs in Hawaii, first with the Dole Company for a short time and then with IBM for about 14 years. He left IBM in 1985-86 and started his own company in Southern California, providing IT support for companies.

While still running his IT company, Geiling accepted the job of president and CEO at the Gold Star Manor.

While working at the Gold Star Manor and then the Fisher House, Geiling was also active with other community organizations.

He served on the boards for both St. Mary Medical Center and the hospital's foundation. He also served on the Apartment Association board and participated on special committees for Goodwill and the Long Beach Area Chamber of Commerce.

With the Rotary Club, he participated in trips to administer the polio vaccine to children of migrant workers and to provide books, computers and clear water facilities to schools in rural areas of Mexico.

Carolyn Caldwell, president and CEO at St. Mary's, said Geiling was "a guiding force" for the hospital's mission of providing quality health care.

Glen Patrick, who succeeded Geiling at the Gold Star Manor, said his predecessor was "one of the greatest leaders I've ever worked with."

"He had great vision and could look into the future in solving problems," Patrick said. "He was a mentor and a dear friend. He had more energy than men half his age."

Chris Pook, who was chair of the St. Mary Medical Center Community Board before Geiling, said in a statement that his death “was truly a very sad day for Long Beach. Terry represented everything that was good about America.”

At her home Monday, Nancy Geiling spoke lovingly about the man she had been married to for 59 years.

He loved his garden, tending to his favorite tomato plants and other vegetables and plumeria flowers, she said.

“He also loved to walk,” Geiling’s widow said. “He would walk around the neighborhood and the Colorado Lagoon for an hour every day. He also rode his bike a lot.”

He also was “a wonderful cook,” said.

When they married, the couple discovered they had different musical tastes, but they worked that out.

“He was a country music fan and I was a fan of opera,” Nancy Geiling said with a smile. “We were torn between Johnny Cash and Luciano Pavarotti.”

Besides his multiple community activities in Long Beach, Terry Geiling also enjoyed working on committees to help support the Rose Parade every year, his widow said.

“He liked wearing a white suit and red tie” while attending the New Year’s Day parade, she said.

About eight years ago, Geiling faced a major challenge: He developed Stage 4 cancer of the lymph nodes.

But he didn’t falter.

“That can mean you’re going to die, but I fought it with chemotherapy and beat it,” he said in a 2020 interview. “I lost a lot of weight, but I didn’t miss a day of work. I was very lucky. I have been very fortunate to have a great wife, family and friends to support me. I’m giving back to those not so fortunate.”

Nancy Geiling said her husband always was an optimistic person.

Despite her grief, Nancy Geiling has found comfort in a favorite poem of hers by Alfred Lord Tennyson called “Crossing the Bar.” The poem describes Tennyson’s attitude toward death — and reflects the optimism her husband had.

The poem, written in 1889, sees the speaker compare dying to crossing the sandbar between a coastal area and the wider ocean. The moral is that death should not be feared because the speaker is going to meet his “Pilot,” his God.

“Twilight and evening bell,” the poem goes, “And after that the dark!/ And may there be no sadness of farewell/ When I embark/For tho’ from out our bourne of Time and Place/The flood may bear me far/I hope to see my Pilot face to face/When I have crost the bar.”

Besides his wife, Nancy, Geiling is survived by his son, Chuck Geiling; his daughter, Sara Geiling; and three grandchildren.

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