

Charles W. Collier, a philanthropic adviser who considered adversity 'a gift,' dies at 70



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Mr. Collier was an expert on colleges' philanthropy.

By [Bryan Marquard](#) | GLOBE STAFF AUGUST 08, 2018

Charles Collier never needed clerical garb to offer ministerial advice. "Working with

wealthy people, I take confession well,” he once quipped about his role at Harvard University, guiding families in making philanthropic decisions.

And it was no surprise to those who knew him that he made a confession of his own upon being diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer’s disease — a public disclosure he hoped would encourage important, candid conversations about the illness. True to form, he offered a homily of hope, not despair.

“I think my illness is a gift,” he said.

Mr. Collier, who was 70 when he died Thursday, saw every adversity as a door to pass through, beyond which lay a new way to perceive the world, a blank notebook awaiting life’s next chapter.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that all of us will have challenges in our lives,” he said in a video posted on [his website](#). “We are all dealt a hand of cards in life. Some of it is good. Some of it is not so good. The best way to think about it is this: How am I going to react to the cards that I’ve been dealt?”

Characteristically, Mr. Collier responded to his diagnosis by helping others. He worked with the Cure Alzheimer’s Fund and donated his own money to help fund research. He also spoke in interviews and to larger groups, even as illness eroded the crisp confidence that had defined his public presentations.

“He wanted to make a difference in his life, he wanted to leave a legacy,” said his wife, Susan Handy Stover, “and he did, in many, many ways.”

There was, in his family, a tradition of writing letters to subsequent generations — to engage in a dialogue with descendants who might not be old enough for face-to-face

conversations before death came calling.

“It was my greatest pleasure to meet you, my first granddaughter, when you were less than two weeks old. When I held you I was struck by your beauty and serenity,” Mr. Collier wrote three summers ago to Liza.

“As your grandfather, I am curious about a lot of things,” he added. “I’m curious about what you will do with your one precious life.”

Legacies — those bequests that can be financial, familial, and emotional — were often on Mr. Collier’s mind, personally and professionally.

As Harvard’s senior philanthropic adviser, he brought a wealth of experience to the often delicate task of helping families decide how much to donate and where to put their money to work.

Mr. Collier started his fund-raising career at Dartmouth College, from which he received a bachelor’s degree in religion in 1971, and he had been the major gifts officer at Phillips Andover Academy, from which he graduated in 1967. He also was a planned giving officer at Brown University and director of planned giving at Princeton University before moving to Harvard in the mid-1980s and settling in Wellesley, where he lived with his family for many years.

Classes at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family in Washington, D.C., shaped his approach to philanthropic guidance, as did learning from his mentors, Jay Hughes and Kathy Wiseman, who are leaders in the field.

In his work, Mr. Collier stressed “the importance of family conversations and the sacredness of individuality,” said Alasdair

Halliday, philanthropic adviser and director of principal gifts at Harvard.

“Wealth in Families,” Mr. Collier’s 2001 book, “ended up becoming an iconic text in the family wealth field,” Halliday added.

“*The best way to think about it is this: How am I going to react to the cards that I’ve been dealt?*”

Honored for his work in philanthropic advising and his advocacy after his diagnosis, Mr. Collier received a distinguished service award from Phillips Andover, the Harvard Medal from [Harvard University](#), the Peter T. Gomes STB ’68 Memorial Honors [award from](#) Harvard Divinity School, and a Lifetime Achievement Award from Family Wealth Report. The Cure Alzheimer’s Fund [honored him](#) during its 10th anniversary symposium in 2014.

Relentlessly curious and tirelessly compassionate, Mr. Collier was a leader in his field and a mentor as well. “Among Charlie’s many virtues were generosity of spirit and generosity of time,” Halliday said.

“‘Adviser’ was a critical word — he advised so many people,” said Mr. Collier’s son Benjamin of Bronxville, N.Y. “He was constantly, selflessly, giving advice.”

The youngest of four children, Charles Whitney Collier was born in Wellesley in 1948, the son of Abram Thurlow Collier and the former Eleanor Whitney.

“The strongest influence on my life has been the quiet yet profound example of my parents,” Mr. Collier wrote in his book.

For his parents, generosity went beyond being emotionally available, or simply what was left in a will. At 75, Abram donated a kidney to a grandson. Even at a family

dinner, “he would say: ‘I don’t want any cheap talk. I want to talk about ideas,’ ” Mr. Collier recalled for his father’s obituary, when Abram died in 2008, at 95.

Mr. Collier married Sally Stoddard, and they had two children. Their marriage ended in divorce, and she lives in Wellesley.

After graduating from Dartmouth, Mr. Collier received a master’s from Harvard Divinity School in 1973. Before entering the fields of fund-raising and planned giving, he was a professional photographer and taught photography and Bible studies at Proctor Academy in New Hampshire.

Mr. Collier had photographed one-room schoolhouses throughout New England and was as adept at patiently looking at a scene as he was quietly listening to a conversation.

“He was much more about the questions than the answers, much more about bringing awareness to things,” said his son Whit of Wellesley.

Mr. Collier was known for clipping articles and sending them to friends and families with a note enclosed. When he offered a pronouncement, it often was accompanied by a quote from a philosopher.

“Find a burning passion and turn it into meaningful work,” he wrote in his letter to his granddaughter. “What is my life’s true purpose? Thomas Aquinas said: ‘To work well is to live well.’ ”

In addition to his wife, two sons, granddaughter, and former wife, Mr. Collier leaves three sisters, Linda Collier Kenerson of Wellesley, Deborah Collier Zug of Bryn Mawr, Pa., and Joyce Collier Fearnside of Peterborough, N.H.; and two grandsons.

A memorial service will be held at 3:30 p.m. Sept. 29 in Dublin Community Church in Dublin, N.H., the community where Mr. Collier lived with Susan Handy Stover.

“He wanted to have value in his life,” his son Ben said, “and he did.”

Perhaps because of Mr. Collier’s divinity school studies, “he had that ability to minister to people in a way. He had a tremendous capacity for love and believed that was what mattered in life,” said Susan, who had known Mr. Collier for many years before they married in 2015.

“Even while he was dying, there were moments when I knew he could hear me,” she recalled. “I would say, ‘I love you,’ and his eyes — which were sort of pinballing back and forth as he was struggling — would stop, and he would blink twice, and we knew he was communicating with me.”

Despite the illness, she said, “his spirit was there, his soul was there.”

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