

“His legacy will never be forgotten”: Steffler’s influence far-reaching, BC3 leaders past and present say

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Ray D. Steffler served 34 years as a Butler County Community College trustee, the final 20 as board chairman. Steffler passed away Feb. 16, 2019.

(Butler, PA) From the head of a 26-foot-long, U-shaped wood-grained table, and from behind an 8½-inch-wide brushed nickel nameplate that, like the gray- and blue-carpeted room in which they are located bore his name, Ray D. Steffler inspired fellow Butler County Community College trustees and administrators to make his alma mater the best it can be.

To the left of his blue-cushioned chair inside the Ray D. Steffler Board Room are four windows, framing an oak-tree-lined campus and the students that the longest-serving chairman of the college’s board of trustees loved so dearly.

“When I walk out of this room and I walk across campus, and I see the faces, I continually say, ‘What’s their story?’” Steffler said in an October 2017 interview. “I truly have seen a lot of lives altered in a positive direction as a result of us. I come up quite often and just walk around. A lot of times I go to the Heaton Family Learning Commons and I just sit and watch. And I go to the Pioneer Café and I do the same thing. Just watch the interaction. I enjoy that.”

Steffler, of Valencia, became a BC3 trustee in July 1985, and 10 months later, at age 49, earned an associate degree in business management from BC3 on the same night as did his daughter, Michelle.

The 82-year-old who also served more years as a BC3 trustee than any other person since members were first chosen in 1965-66, helped to form the BC3 Alumni Association in 1997, created an annual scholarship with his family for BC3 business students in 2000 and coined the phrase “Pioneer Proud,” passed away Feb. 16, 2019.

Those around him, occupying the other 16 seats within the Ray D. Steffler Board Room named in his honor in September 2013, and those from across Butler County and Pennsylvania, were proud to have known Steffler and valued his perspective.

“Mr. Steffler was a very significant factor in my transition into the presidency of BC3,” said Dr. Fred Bartok, who served as BC3’s sixth chief executive officer from 1994-2002. “His understanding of the county and the board history was invaluable to me trying to establish a vision and goals for the college.

“There were many occasions during my tenure that Ray helped to deliver our plans, hopes and aspirations to fellow board members, as well as to state and local political leaders. I knew that I could always count on his candor and his sincere desire for us to succeed.”

Those local political leaders today include Butler County Commissioners Leslie Osche, Kim Geyer and Kevin Boozel.

“Like a father”

“Ray was a servant who never needed or wanted fanfare,” Osche said. “He was like a father to so many people, providing a steady guiding hand, encouragement, trust, and most of all, faith. Mr. Steffler was a fierce advocate and a guiding force for BC3. He stood tall for the institution through some very critical times and challenges. He gracefully endured criticism, and knew how to keep the ship steady despite the waves that rocked the boat in the water.”

Steffler bought whole-heartedly into the hope and opportunity BC3 provides to each and every student, said Geyer, a 1984 BC3 graduate and member of BC3’s board of trustees since 2011.

“He dedicated his life in volunteering as an actively engaged trustee to help improve an already outstanding institution to ensure others, like he, could take advantage of all the quality education programs and services he himself knew to be, having once been a BC3 student himself,” Geyer said.

As an actively engaged trustee, Steffler created the Steffler Family Annual Scholarship, served on the BC3 Education Foundation board since 2006, and established a scholarship in honor of three Seneca Valley High School students who died in a car crash. He was one of four graduates to have a BC3 Alumni Legacy Scholarship named in his honor in May 2017 and, in October 2017, joined Geyer and Boozel among BC3’s 51 distinguished alumni.

“His humble behavior was a role model not often observed,” said Boozel, a 1991 BC3 graduate. “I would compare Ray’s demeanor to that of my own dad (Eugene). Ray had a special way of listening and talked very little, but when he did he never gave you the answer you wanted to hear, but rather the words that made you want to do better.

“He was kind, sincere, gentle, firm, trustworthy, open and honest. Ray often sent encouraging notes just to let me know he was thinking of me or wanted to let me know he was there for me. I believe he had the special gift of making many feel that way – just like our alma mater.”

Steffler’s influence was also felt far beyond that U-shaped wood-grained table, beyond that brushed nickel nameplate and those windows overlooking the campus and students he loved so dearly.

“A big-picture perspective”

Dr. Anna Weitz served as president of Pennsylvania Highlands Community College in Johnstown from 2002-2007 and of Reading Area Community College from 2007-2018. She and Steffler often “crossed paths” at Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges meetings, and at community college lobbying events in Harrisburg and in Washington, D.C.

“I was always struck not only by Ray’s faithful attendance at such events, but his active and knowledgeable participation as well,” Weitz said. “While Ray demonstrated great pride in BC3 and all its accomplishments, he also consistently took a big-picture perspective about the need for all 14 Pennsylvania community colleges to speak with one voice when it came to our legislative agenda.

“I believe Ray knew that approach – whether it was in matters of state operational or capital funding, strengthening our community and political position, advocating that the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency and the federal Department of Education adjust their financial aid policies to deal with the realities of our often part-time, workforce-oriented student population – was not only right, but potentially more impactful than our institutions going it alone in those arenas.”

Trustees, Weitz stressed, “are volunteers, clearly motivated by a commitment to their own institution as well as the overall mission of comprehensive community colleges. Our institutions are stronger for having such dedicated, involved and knowledgeable trustees as Ray Steffler, whose decades of service to BC3 and, in fact all Pennsylvania community colleges, was not only noteworthy, but important to our success.”

Added Elizabeth Bolden, president and chief executive officer of the Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges: “Without dedicated and knowledgeable trustees like Mr. Steffler, community colleges in Pennsylvania would not be equipped to offer the quality, affordable higher education on which they pride themselves.”

Steffler also served 19 years as a field representative to state Sens. Mary Jo White and Scott E. Hutchinson, whose 21st senatorial district includes portions of Butler County.

“Ray believed absolutely in the power of education to change lives,” White said. “It was a path not only to a better standard of living for families, but it enriched the quality of our lives. He was very grateful to BC3 for his education and felt a deep obligation to help others have the same opportunity. He was a deeply religious person who gave generously of his time and resources.”

“Incredible loyalty and dedication”

Steffler replaced Betty F. Bajcz on BC3’s board of trustees in July 1985. Among those with whom he would serve on the board over the next 34 years were Gregory Zappala, from 1995 to 2008; and Dr. Robert M. Smith, Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania’s president, from 2005 to 2011.

“From my first meeting, it was apparent that Ray was not political nor motivated from political affiliation even though he was a staffer for Senator Mary Jo White,” Zappala said. “Ray was more interested in doing what was in the best interest of the college and community, which made it really easy to work together and create a friendship bond. We both had the same view of the college. We felt that the college was one of the most valuable assets of Butler County and that it needed to be maintained as one of the best institutions within the commonwealth because of the massive benefits to the community.”

Zappala credits Steffler in working with White to obtain a grant to aid in funding the construction of BC3’s Public Safety Training Facility, which opened in 2002.

“This was a major win for the college driven by Ray and his relationship with the senator,” Zappala said. “This grant had a huge impact on the net cost to the college and the county and was a key piece in getting (former Butler County commissioners’) support and completing the facility.”

That Steffler served more than three decades as a BC3 trustee and the final 20 as its chairman “is unheard of and testimony to the incredible loyalty and dedication Ray gave to the college,” Smith said. “He served during every major transformational event in the history of BC3 except for the opening, and I’m betting he was there for that event as well. BC3 was his second love after (his wife) Kay and no one could have been more devoted. Ray’s volunteering was his way of assuring the students at BC3 received the best leadership and best education.

“Ray saw himself in those students, people whose lives were not privileged nor pampered but whose hard work and diligence would overcome their circumstances if given the chance.”

Steffler saw himself in those students outside the window of the Ray D. Steffler Board Room, where he had been joined on the current board by Gordon L. Marburger, Glenn T. Miller and Dr. William DiCuccio.

Steffler “made it happen”

“He felt fortunate to have had the opportunity to attend college and earn a degree right in his own community,” said Marburger, a BC3 trustee since 2001. “It was those feelings of gratitude and accomplishment that spurred his passion to promote and champion the community college experience in his local community of Butler County and beyond.”

The Steffler Family Annual Scholarship is awarded to a Butler County resident who is a full-time freshman and enrolled in BC3’s accounting, business administration or business management programs. In February 2010 Steffler established the scholarship for Seneca Valley High School students who wish to attend BC3 following the accident of their classmates.

Steffler also inspired Marburger, a dairy farmer, to sponsor a Four-H Club scholarship for BC3-bound students and in memory of Marburger’s mother, Judy, and father, George, whom Gordon replaced on BC3’s board of trustees after George’s passing.

Steffler “knew both of my parents and that they were dedicated supporters of higher education, especially BC3,” Marburger said. “But it was Ray’s passion that was the catalyst to develop a 4-H scholarship. He made it happen. He took our support of BC3 and made it tangible and meaningful. He knew that tied to every scholarship was a student who could use help in pursuing their education and he didn’t want to see any student be denied the opportunities of a BC3 education.”

Miller also had the opportunity of a BC3 education – and, like Steffler, the chance to serve as a trustee and at the invitation of former Butler County Commissioner Bill McCarrier.

Miller, a 1981 BC3 graduate, said he was nervous when he entered Lawson Board Room in BC3’s administration building on that late afternoon in the summer of 1997, realizing he would be asked to introduce himself, knowing that he was “the new guy looking at all these faces.”

In introducing himself, Miller said, “When I graduated from BC3, I decided that since BC3 was a turning point in my life, if I had the opportunity, I wanted to give back. And when Bill McCarrier appointed me, I thought, ‘If this is my way of giving back, I want to do this.’”

Seated across from Miller was Steffler, nodding his head.

“And (Steffler) said, ‘That’s exactly right,’” Miller said. “Ray’s mindset was the same. He wanted to give back. That was his entire goal at BC3. To give back.”

Steffler’s response in Miller’s first meeting “took a lot of pressure off,” Miller said, adding that Steffler “kind of scooped me up and took me under his wing, and that is why I call him my second earthly father. As far as my BC3 path, he helped me.”

No one, Miller said, can give back as did Steffler.

“Nobody,” he said. “Each man’s life touches so many. And now that we don’t have Ray, there is a huge void. And I don’t know if we will completely understand that until time goes on.”

Faith, family and BC3 were the three most important aspects of Steffler’s life, said DiCuccio, adding that among the board’s accomplishments while he served as Steffler’s vice chair was selecting Dr. Nick Neupauer as BC3’s eighth president in 2007.

“We knew he had the same ideas as Ray and wants nothing but the best for the college,” said DiCuccio, who began as a trustee in 2005 and served as Steffler’s vice chair from 2007 to 2016. “And it shows. We are now No. 1 (in back-to-back rankings by Schools.com). We need to remain No. 1. I know Ray is not going to be there, but the rest of us have to pick up the slack and continue his legacy of keeping it No. 1.”

“He gave so much time”

Inside the Ray D. Steffler Board Room eight times a year, Neupauer sat immediately to Steffler’s left, at the head of that 26-foot long, U-shaped wood-grained table, and nearer those windows framing students crisscrossing BC3’s campus.

Also within view, the 2½-year-old, \$6.4 million Heaton Family Learning Commons -- which resulted from a \$6.8 million Pioneer Proud Campaign, on whose steering committee Steffler served – inside of which he would sit and watch students’ interactions.

“He gave so much time, resources and wisdom to our college over the years,” Neupauer said. “His role as longtime board chair was simple: eliminate the politics and support the college president. Above all, he believed in ‘taking the high-road’ and always ‘doing the right thing.’”

So that his alma mater, as Steffler desired, could be the best it can be.

“To some, those may be cliché-type statements,” Neupauer said. “But not for Mr. Steffler. His leadership style focused back to those simple philosophies. Mr. Steffler has much to do with our back-to-back No. 1 rankings as the commonwealth’s best community college.

“His legacy will never be forgotten.”

A celebration of Steffler’s life will be held at 1:30 p.m. March 17 in Founders Hall on BC3’s main campus in Butler Township.