



OBITUARIES



Stephen J. Harmelin, former Dilworth Paxson chair, passionate Philadelphian and history lover who helped shape Center City, has died at 85

Mr. Harmelin had a hand in creating the Barnes Foundation, the Convention Center, and the National Constitution Center, among other institutions.



Stephen J. Harmelin, who died at age 85 on May 3, 2025.

Courtesy of Alison Harmelin

When the White House called a Harvard fraternity looking for Stephen J. Harmelin in 1964, his frat brothers assumed it had to be a practical joke, and hung up. Repeatedly.

It was no joke.

President Lyndon Baines Johnson needed a director of speechwriting, and he had landed on Mr. Harmelin, then a Harvard Law student in his mid-20s and a Philadelphia native.

In Washington, he would help found the White House Fellows program. But he would return home to become a towering figure in corporate law, eventually cochairing Dilworth Paxson, and later used his stature as an attorney to leave an imprint on a hometown that he loved dearly.

A history lover and a passionate Philadelphian, Mr. Harmelin died at his home in Society Hill on Saturday, May 3, at 85, just four days before his birthday, and after a battle with Parkinson's disease. He was surrounded by family.



Gala attendees (from left) Marjorie Silverman, Adele Schaeffer, Stephen J. Harmelin, and his wife, Julia Harmelin.

Paul Loftland Photography

Nearby were many physical monuments to his life — the Barnes Foundation, the Convention Center, the National Constitution Center — and other iconic institutions that Mr. Harmelin had a hand in.

“He quietly built Philadelphia,” said daughter Alison Harmelin on Saturday. “He believed in his heart that Philadelphia was a world-class city.”

Along the way, Mr. Harmelin helped orchestrate the Bicentennial Celebrations, displays of the Magna Carta in Philadelphia, and showed off his home to European royalty while rubbing elbows with senators and governors.

“They say all men die, but not every man really lives. Well, Steve lived,” said Alison Harmelin. “And he lived 100% of his life here in Philadelphia. Even when he was away from Philadelphia, he was a pure Philadelphian.”

Born May 7, 1939, in Northwest Philadelphia, Mr. Harmelin attended Central High School and later the University of Pennsylvania.

After a stint in the Coast Guard, service in the White House, and completion of his degree — with honors — at Harvard, the young lawyer went to work straight away at Dilworth Paxson, under former Mayor Richardson Dilworth in 1965.

Until his retirement in 2019, he would leave the firm only briefly: In 1970, he went to work under Philadelphia District Attorney Arlen Specter as a special prosecutor. The two men formed a lifelong friendship, with Mr. Harmelin doing work for Specter’s U.S. Senate campaign.

To commemorate the 200th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution, Mr. Harmelin helped bring an original copy of the Magna Carta to Philadelphia in 1987.

“This will be an excellent opportunity to remind people of the great gift that English-speaking people gave to the world: the supremacy of the law,” Mr. Harmelin said in a 1987 interview with *The Inquirer*. “We’re talking about two

documents that made the most profound change in the lives of people since, I guess, the beginning of the Christian era.”

As a trustee of the Magna Carta Foundation of Philadelphia, Mr. Harmelin and former Judge Edward R. Becker of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit secured the exhibit of the 13th-century document, which ensured English rulers’ power no longer went unchecked.

The ceremonies were attended by Queen Elizabeth’s cousin Princess Alexandra and the attorneys general of the United States and Britain.

The same copy returned to Philadelphia in 2001 for a display at the newly formed Independence Visitor Center.

In 1989, Mr. Harmelin was appointed by former Gov. Bob Casey Sr. as a commissioner on the board of the Pennsylvania Convention Center Authority. He served on the board until 2002.

He went on to become a founding board member of the National Constitution Center, which opened in September 2000. .

Jeff Rosen, CEO of the Constitution Center, said Mr. Harmelin was a “towering figure,” whose contributions to the history museum and the city of Philadelphia will continue to “endure.”

In March 2003, Mr. Harmelin helped recover and restore North Carolina’s missing copy of the Bill of Rights, which was stolen from a Union soldier in the waning days of the Civil War.

After a dealer reached out to the Constitution Center, Mr. Harmelin determined it was a 138-year-old handwritten copy that was swiped from the North Carolina statehouse. He arranged a sting operation led by the FBI to retrieve and restore the document.

“It was an incredible act of detective work and bravery, and he was absolutely central to that,” Rosen said.

In 2013, Mr. Harmelin was instrumental in recognizing Pennsylvania’s original copy of the Bill of Rights was being held at the New York Public Library. He arranged a historic agreement with the library, allowing the document to be shared with the state of Pennsylvania for the next 100 years.

The Bill of Rights copy was displayed at the Constitution Center between 2015 and 2017 thanks to Mr. Harmelin's efforts, Rosen said. "There's no one else in American history who's responsible for restoring two original copies of the Bill of Rights to their owners, and [Mr. Harmelin] deserves all the credit."

He also served on the board of the Barnes Foundation for many years, and was instrumental in relocating **billions** worth of paintings and sculptures to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway from the Barnes' original location in Lower Merion.

Along with his public service and dedication to American history, Mr. Harmelin joined The Inquirer's board of directors after Gerry Lenfest acquired the news organization in 2014.

Jim Friedlich, CEO of the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, said his same passion for education and community engagement carried over into service journalism.

"In a city of firsts, Steve Harmelin was a founding father of a new legal structure to ensure the health and independence of a great American newspaper," Friedlich said in a written statement Sunday. "The Inquirer is now the largest U.S. newspaper under nonprofit ownership, thanks to [Mr. Harmelin], Gerry Lenfest, and a handful of other Philadelphia visionaries."

"There is no level of pain in his loss that compares to the privilege of having known him," Alison Harmelin said of her father. "He was a great man."

In addition to his daughter, Mr. Harmelin is survived by his wife of 30 years, Julia Harmelin; another daughter, Melina Harmelin; a son, Thomas Tracy; seven grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

A memorial service is tentatively planned at the Barnes Foundation at the end of May. A specific date has not yet been confirmed.

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