

Kenneth H. Olsen, Digital Computing Pioneer, Entrepreneur and Gordon Board Member, Remembered

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WENHAM, MA—Widely recognized as one of the 20th century's leading computer industry pioneers, Mr. Kenneth H. Olsen, founder and former CEO of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC), long time trustee at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, and alumnus of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), died Sunday, February 6, 2011. He would have been 85 years old on February 20.

In 2008, the Ken Olsen Science Center was dedicated at Gordon College during which time Olsen's archives were given to the College.

"An inventor, scientist, and entrepreneur, Ken Olsen is one of the true pioneers of the computing industry," said Bill Gates, founder and chairman of Microsoft, in a letter to Gordon College. "He was also a major influence in my life and his influence is still important at Microsoft through all the engineers who trained at Digital and have come here to make great software products."

Born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Olsen developed a love and curiosity for electronics at a young age. After an enlistment in the Navy during World War II, he attended MIT for both undergraduate and graduate degrees. While at MIT, he worked on a team that developed air defense technology and core memory, the precursor to today's RAM. He married Aulikki Valve in Finland on December 12, 1950.

In 1957, he co-founded DEC in a refurbished mill in Maynard just outside of Boston, a company that grew to over 125,000 employees in 86 countries. Countless CEOs, engineers and inventors recognize Olsen's technological innovations, leadership style and entrepreneurial philosophies as the foundation for today's information and computer networking industry.

"Ken Olsen was a pioneer of the computer age, but beyond that, he was a good man. He was a major philanthropist who did his giving quietly, never seeking recognition or thanks. Ken's many contributions to business, leadership and technological innovations were unmatched," said Tom Phillips, former chairman of Raytheon and fellow board member at Gordon College since 1970. "He cared deeply about his family, his faith and of course, his work, and sincerely expected that each would help make the world better. That was his legacy and I'm proud to have called him friend."

Under Olsen's 35-year leadership tenure, DEC pioneered the concepts behind interactive computing. Creating one of the first digital computers for commercial use, DEC marketed the "mini-computer" and set records in size and affordability. The company also set industry standards in program languages, operating systems, networking architectures, applications software, computer peripherals, component and circuit technology, manufacturing processes and business practices.

In 1986 Fortune Magazine named him the “most successful entrepreneur in the history of American business.” He was also inducted into multiple halls of fame including the National Inventor’s Hall of Fame (1990) and the Computer History Museum (1996). He served on the boards of several prestigious organizations including the Computer Science and Engineering Board of the National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C.; and as a member of the President’s Science Advisory Committee. He was awarded the National Medal of Technology in 1993.

Olsen had a particular fondness for Christian higher education. As an active member of Park Street Church in Boston, Olsen joined the board of Gordon College in 1961, along with fellow trustees Phillips and evangelist Billy Graham. Olsen admired Gordon’s openness to scientific inquiry and commitment to the Christian faith, and provided both spiritual and business input for the next 50 years. He supported numerous capital and building projects in all areas of academics, athletics, music and the arts, and moved the College towards greater efficiency in technology by donating his time, expertise, and company equipment.

In his early leadership at DEC, Olsen often visited Gordon’s campus to meet informally with science students or professors about specific developments in computing. Sometimes he would drop off his latest prototype for Gordon scientists and challenge them to “play around with this in the lab and let me know what you think.” Because of his involvement, Gordon was a natural recipient for his archives.

“Ken Olsen made a lasting impact on generations of science students at Gordon College. He took his leadership role seriously, not just attending meetings but also helping to design new computer labs, giving of his own resources for the College to meet its financial goals, and asking the tough questions that a growing institution needed to answer,” said Gordon College President R. Judson Carlberg. “Ken never saw a conflict between his Christian commitment and his embrace of scientific methods. It was up to us to understand how science and the Bible were two expressions of God’s creativity; and we are still pursuing that task.”

Through all of his accomplishments, Olsen’s family and friends defined him by his humble commitment to loving God, loving excellence and loving others. His character in and out of the workplace reflected his life-long belief that values, business ethics, and scientific inquiry should coincide with faith in God.

“Science is more than a study of molecules and calculations; it is the love of knowledge and the continued search for the truth,” Olsen once wrote. “The study of the sciences promotes humility, leaving us with a clear sense that we will never understand all there is to know. At the same time, science provides a defense for truth, authenticates Christianity and stems from the nature of God.”

A public memorial service will be held at Gordon College (255 Grapevine Road, Wenham, MA, Exit 17 from Route 128) on Saturday, May 14, 2011, at 2 p.m., and a documentary of Ken Olsen is scheduled for release by the College later in 2011. Friends and former colleagues are encouraged to leave a memory about Olsen on www.gordon.edu/kenolsen.