

Dr. Allen Y. Baker

Dr. Allen Y. Baker, a longtime community leader in Pinckneyville and Southern Illinois, died in Largo, Florida, on March 13, 2020. He was three months short of his 99th birthday.

Dr. Baker was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, on June 12, 1921, to Charles and Sophie Baker. He had one sister, Jane. His mother reared him alone and he worked selling newspapers every day after school during his student years.

He graduated from Allentown High School in Pennsylvania and then attended Northern Illinois College of Optometry, graduating in 1942. He immediately joined the Army, and provided his skills in the Medical Corps. While stationed at Fort Lewis, Wash., he met Stella Baird, whom he married in 1948.

Dr. Baker was discharged from the Army in 1946 and set out to become a civilian optometrist. While hitchhiking toward Cairo, Ill., for a job interview, he was given a ride to Pinckneyville. He decided it was a good place to settle, and opened an office in the Sherman House hotel.

Early on, he felt a duty to serve his community. He became a scoutmaster and served in regional scouting organizations.

He joined the Pinckneyville Rotary, and amassed a 72-year record of perfect attendance that was among the longest in the history of that world organization.

Dr. Baker also joined the Pinckneyville Chamber of Commerce. He saw that the community needed jobs, and he led the chamber's industrial committee. During a few years in the 1950s, his committee brought three factories to the area east of town, and those plants employed as many as 500 people at their peak.

Carrying that commitment to community and jobs a step further, he was a founding member of the Greater Egypt Regional Planning and Development Commission, where he served on the board for 27 years.

Figuring that education was another pillar of community and economic advancement, Dr. Baker joined the steering committee for formation of Rend lake Community College in 1967. He was a leader of the campaign to persuade voters to pass a tax for the college, and was one of the founding members of the Board of Trustees, where he served as a trustee for 13 years, including four years as chairman. He and Stella endowed a perpetual scholarship that provides full tuition for two students from the Pinckneyville high school each year.

Looking beyond the region to the needs of young people across the state, he was a charter member of the Illinois Community College Trustees Association, and led that board for two of the nine years he served there.

Dr. Baker was appointed to the Illinois State Scholarship Commission, where he worked hard to allocate more state scholarship money to community college students. He served on that commission for 11 years, frequently making the long drive to Chicago for meetings.

His occupation was in the health field, and he served in that area as well. He was on the Pinckneyville Community Hospital Board, where he served time as chairman, and on the Comprehensive Health

Planning Agency in Southern Illinois. In his own profession, he was president of the Illinois Optometric Association and served as chairman of the group's legislative committee for three years. He was named Illinois Optometrist of the Year in 1989.

After 45 years of practicing optometry and serving Southern Illinois, Dr. Baker and Stella relocated to Clearwater, Florida, in 1991.

Dr. Baker continued his work with Rotary there, holding the position of secretary for many years in the Belleair Rotary Club. He also served on the board of his condominium association. He did take some personal time for golf with Stella at the Bellair Country Club.

Stella Baker passed away from cancer in 2012, after the two had been married for more than 64 years.

Dr. Baker outlived many of his friends in Pinckneyville and in Florida, but his wit and intelligence remained sharp until his passing.

Surviving are son Allen Baker and daughter-in-law Suzanne Frey in Ashland, Oregon, along with daughter Debbie Arett and son-in-law Kyle Arett of Atlanta. Surviving also are grandson Aaron Baker of Seattle, great-grandchildren Brenda, Celeste and Aaron Jr. of Seattle, and granddaughter Dana Baker of Lansing, Mich.

No services are planned at this time. Dr. Baker will be interred next to Stella at Serenity Gardens in Largo. Donations may be made in his memory to the Rotary Foundation or to Rend Lake College.