

Fayetteville businessman and real estate developer John Koenig dies December 24, 2013 by Nancy McCleary

John Koenig wasn't a man to take "no" for an answer. "His willfulness carried him through the years," his son, John Steven Koenig, recalled of his father "He was the bull in the china shop, and that got him through the early challenges of his life." The elder Koenig, 83, a prominent businessman and developer, died early Tuesday at his home after a bout with cancer.

As a land developer, Mr. Koenig helped shape Fayetteville and adjoining counties, building many of the subdivisions. As a U.S. Army veteran, Mr. Koenig was instrumental in making plans for the Airborne & Special Operations Museum, a Fayetteville landmark that now draws thousands of visitors downtown each year. "I've known John many, many years," retired Col. Jack Cox said. "He was an entrepreneur and a developer, but never forgot the common man."

Mr. Koenig, born in the former Yugoslavia, was a young boy when the German army invaded and occupied the country in 1941, said retired Gen. James Lindsay, former commander of the 82nd Airborne, the 18th Airborne Corps and the first Special Operations commander. Mr. Lindsay also was a close friend of Mr. Koenig's.

In 1944, as a teenager, Mr. Koenig and his family fled their homeland to Austria, ahead of an advancing Russian army, Mr. Lindsay said. Two years later, Mr. Koenig went alone to Germany, where he worked for several years as a farm laborer. In 1950, Congress passed the Lodge-Philbin Act, which allowed the Army to recruit foreign nationals. Eastern European men were highly valued for their ability to work in the Soviet Bloc countries during the Cold War, Mr. Lindsay said. After five years of successful service, the soldiers received an honorable discharge and guaranteed U.S. citizenship.

Mr. Koenig enlisted in 1952 and went on to a 22-year career in the Army. "He did two tours in Vietnam and was decorated for valor with the Vietnamese Airborne," Mr. Lindsay said. Mr. Koenig served in Special Forces, which brought him to Fort Bragg, Mr. Lindsay said. Mr. Koenig retired from the Army in 1974, stayed in Fayetteville and got into the real estate business.

From humble beginnings - a mobile home on Yadkin Road - Mr. Koenig eventually opened four offices in Fayetteville and expanded to Jacksonville, his son said. Subdivisions developed by Mr. Koenig include Waters Edge, Lake Shores, Southgate, Montibello, Beaver Run and, in Harnett County, Northridge Plantations. Mr. Koenig sparked controversy in the mid-2000s when he sought, and eventually got, approval to build a 141-lot subdivision in Eastover.

Mr. Koenig's staunch devotion to the Army and Special Forces prompted him to help get the museum on Hay Street up and running. "He loved that museum," said Linda Marxen, who worked with Mr. Koenig for 28 years at John Koenig Inc. real estate agency. "It was his cause célèbre." Mr. Koenig was among two donors who gave \$50,000 to provide the ASOM Foundation seed money to get plans off the ground, Mr. Lindsay said. "John was invaluable from the very beginning. He was active, since the museum was built," he said. "I doubt that not a week has gone by that he wasn't down there working on something," he said.

Mr. Koenig was introduced to golf later in life and grew to love the sport, his son said. "He always regretted he didn't try the game sooner," the younger Mr. Koenig said. "Once indoctrinated, he couldn't get it out of his blood." He and his wife, Margarete, were supporters of no-kill animal shelters in the region. The Koenigs kept a herd of black Angus cattle, peacocks, ducks, geese and horses at their home outside Fayetteville.

The younger Mr. Koenig said many people helped his father achieve success and that the elder Mr. Koenig lived a "full, rich and dynamic life." "I would say that he has been richly rewarded in life and had his share of difficulty and hardship," John Steven Koenig said. "And he had his share of rewards." Mr. Koenig is survived by his wife, his son, a daughter, three grandchildren and a great-grandson.