

John Karr, historical advocate, dies at 84

By Ramon Bracamontes

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John Karr, a Sunset Heights resident and one of the city's premier advocates of historic preservation and renovation, died Wednesday after a short illness, his family said. He was 84.

It was Karr, officials said, who helped make city leaders aware of the need for historical preservation, and Karr is credited with helping create the Sunset Heights and Old San Francisco Historic Districts.

"He was a pioneer in those issues," state Sen. Eliot Shapleigh said. "John Karr was a stand-up guy. He had strong opinions about issues, and he let you know where he stood."

Starting in 1961 and until this year, Karr helped renovate numerous historic homes and apart-

ments in the Downtown-Sunset Heights area. Often he did the work himself.

Karr's worked in the 1960s, '70s and '80s lead to the establishment of the city's historic landmark ordinances. He was a member of the Landmark Commission under Mayor Jonathan Rogers.

Karr also was known throughout El Paso for his work on civil-rights issues and voter participation.

His daughter, Stephanie Dodson, said her father wrote letters to the newspaper so that people would know where he stood on issues.

"He was a great civil libertarian and a champion of civil rights," Dodson said. "When he took a stand on an issue, people knew it."

He is survived by his wife, Joyce V. Karr; three sons, Michael, Chesley and John Sedgwick; and his daughter, Stephanie Dodson.



Times file photo

John Karr helped create the Sunset Heights and Old San Francisco Historic Districts.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

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KARR

John Ross Karr died Wednesday morning at the age of 84. He was a beloved husband



and father, a lifelong defender of civil liberties, and a 57-year resident of El Paso. He was born in Lyon County, Kansas, on June 10, 1923, the son of Chesley Green Karr and Gertrude

McCrea Karr, and grew up on their productive and picturesque Midwest farm. He attended Emporia State University, where he met Joyce Van Gundy, a fellow Kansan and his future wife. He then enrolled at the United States Military Academy at West Point, where he trained as a pilot and was commissioned as a first lieutenant upon graduation in 1945. After WWII he flew P-47s in Europe. One week after graduating from West Point, he and Joyce were married. Their song was Hoagy Carmichael's "Stardust." In 1950, searching for a warm, dry place to live, John and Joyce set out for Albuquerque. Passing through El Paso just after a summer cloudburst, they were taken with the city's fragrant, fresh-washed feel. Though they quickly learned about El Paso's more typical climate, they never left. That same year John began work as an insurance adjuster, but-as he liked to say-"I wasn't good at having a boss." Thus he started the John Karr Insurance Agency, which he ran for forty years. He also founded MPA, Inc., a company that leased banking equipment. John was amazingly opinionated about politics. Congenitally Democratic, he was a loyal supporter of social reform. For many years he was the heart of El Paso's chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, writing fiery letters to the editor and frequently setting straight many a less open-minded thinker. Nonetheless, in the '70s he ran as a Republican in an attempt to oust the incum-

bent, of whom he greatly disapproved. At age 82 he tried for a seat on the board of trustees of El Paso Community College, a race that ended in him achieving, as he put it, "fourth place out of three." He and Joyce also believed strongly in historical preservation, and renovated many fine homes in their long-time neighborhood, Sunset Heights. After he learned he had sprue-an allergy to wheat-Joyce researched and produced many tasty wheat-free meals, but John joked that he was lucky to be in El Paso, where he could subsist happily for days on chips and salsa. John is survived by his wife, Joyce Karr, and their children: Michael Karr and wife, Marie-Paule Bondat, of Brookline, Massachusetts; Stephanie Karr Dodson and husband, John Dodson, of El Paso; Chesley W. Karr and wife, Kari Ward Karr, of Albuquerque; and John Sedgwick and partner, Patrick Bear, of San Francisco. Also grieving his loss are five grandchildren-Andrew Karr of Sarasota, Florida; Abigail Karr of Boston; Zach Dodson of Chicago; Seth Dodson of Chicago; and Aaron Karr of Albuquerque-as well as a host of loved and loving friends. A memorial service will be held from 5:00 to 6:00 p.m. on Monday, March 17, at the El Paso High School auditorium, 800 E. Schuster Ave. Everyone is welcome. For those kind enough to think of sending flowers, please consider instead a donation to The Karr Family Fund, Visiting Nurse Association of El Paso, 4171 N. Mesa, Bldg. D, Suite 500, 79902.

Goodbye, Gramp. Thank you for everything. We'll take care of Mim, and we'll miss you always. Services entrusted to Harding Orr and McDaniel Funeral Home, 320 Montana Avenue.