

# The Berkshire Eagle

## Bob Wilmers 'always had a soft spot for the Berkshires'



Susan Wissler, executive director of The Mount in Lenox, said Bob Wilmers "was a steadfast mentor and friend whose advice was as valuable to me as his generosity." Wilmers helped finance the purchase of Edith Wharton's 2,600-volume library, shown in this 2012 photo.

EAGLE FILE PHOTO



Posted Saturday, December 23, 2017 1:39 pm

**By Clarence Fanto, Eagle correspondent**

LENOX — When The Mount wanted to purchase Edith Wharton's library from a rare-book dealer in England in 2005, it needed a financial hand.

Built in 1902, the summer home of the author had been undergoing an extensive — and costly — restoration over the years, and a \$2.6 million purchase would be a heavy lift.

Enter Bob Wilmers — who provided a \$2.5 million loan to help finance the purchase.

But by 2008, after years of ongoing operational deficits, the site faced imminent foreclosure, which was avoided thanks to a last-minute Save The Mount campaign. Over the next seven years, Wilmers and Berkshire Bank, The Mount's primary lender, worked with the institution on a formula for stability. As part of that plan, Wilmers eventually forgave all but about \$700,000 of his original loan.

"Throughout my tenure at The Mount, which has been marked by periods of tremendous challenges, Bob was a steadfast mentor and friend whose advice was as valuable to me as his generosity," Executive Director Susan Wissler told The Eagle. "I will miss him greatly."

Wilmers, longtime chairman and CEO of M&T Bank Corp. and an owner of The Berkshire Eagle, died unexpectedly Dec. 16 at his New York City home. He had been a part-time resident of Stockbridge since 1969. He was 83.

Across the Berkshires, cultural leaders are saluting Wilmers for his generous gifts totaling in the millions to museums, historic landmarks and theater companies.

Wilmers also helped rescue the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Becket, which was facing foreclosure in the mid-1990s on a nearly \$5 million loan from Fidelity Investments.

"We were going bankrupt," former board Chairman Neil Chrisman recalled. "Bob and I had worked together at J.P. Morgan in the 1970s and into the '80s; we had stayed in touch."

When Fidelity proposed to settle for a \$1.25 million repayment due by December 1996, Wilmers offered a matching grant of \$500,000, Chrisman said, and with help from a foundation in New York, Jacob's Pillow was able to beat the deadline.

"That became our launching pad to long-term viability," said Chrisman, who's retiring from the board this month after 24 years of service, including as chairman from 1995 to 2009.

In 2007, Wilmers provided the "last brick," an incentive to complete a \$6 million campaign for an endowment at the storied dance festival, Chrisman said.

"We're indebted to him," he stressed. "Although he never was a great dance fan, he enjoyed

experiences there, appreciated the history and saw the value of keeping it going, and now it's going super-strong. Bob was seminal to that recovery. It would have happened in a different manner over much longer time if he hadn't come in."

At the Berkshire Theatre Group, which operates the Colonial Theatre in Pittsfield and two playhouses in Stockbridge, artistic director and CEO Kate Maguire termed Wilmers' contributions "significant, with all kinds of treasure."

As a longtime board member, Wilmers was a trusted and valued adviser, Maguire recalled. "I'm going to miss Bob in particular because of his wisdom; he was such an elegant man and set such an example of fine behavior."

"I had the opportunity to sit with him a couple of times a year, and I learned more from him than most individuals," she said. "I talked about our challenges, and if he didn't give me direct advice, he led me to answers. He'll be a significant part of my memory book for his manner, generosity and gentility."

Noting Wilmers' preference for avoiding the limelight, Maguire described his impact as "extraordinary, and he did it so quietly. We're going to miss him, as will a lot of other communities he impacted. He and his wife, Elisabeth, really symbolized graciousness in a world that's not always gracious anymore."

"The arts and culture community in the Berkshires has lost a great champion with the death of Bob Wilmers," said Olivier Meslay, director of the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown. "The philanthropy that Bob and his wife, Elisabeth, bestowed on so many organizations in the region has benefited our entire community and has made so many organizations stronger and more vibrant."

On a personal note, Meslay said "while The Clark was very fortunate to have been the recipient of the Wilmers' great generosity, what is far more significant to me — and what I consider the greatest benefit of our long relationship — is the advice and willing engagement that Bob shared so freely."

"He was genuinely interested in what we were doing," he said, "and always asked the probing questions that could lead you to look at issues differently or spark new ideas. His questions were always clear and precise, challenging and inspiring us in the very best way."

In 1993, after 24 years at the Old Corner House in downtown Stockbridge, the Norman Rockwell Museum was planning its move to the Linwood estate off Route 183 in the Glendale neighborhood.

Wilmers was serving on the board of trustees at that time. "He has really been transformative, a visionary thinker who could see possibilities on how our cultural community could and would grow," said museum director and CEO Laurie Norton Moffatt. "He was a wonderful philanthropist here and so many other places. He always had a soft spot for the Berkshires."

Moffatt told The Eagle that "Bob made his investments wisely and helped so many of us to grow. He had an extraordinary mind and was very generous."

At the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams, director Joseph Thompson lauded Wilmers' contribution to the contemporary art museum, where his wife has been a longtime board member.

"His generosity didn't come with strings, but with the highest of standards," Thompson said. "Bob and Elisabeth were partners in all things and together were generous in their philanthropic efforts."

"For so many of us, this loss is personal as well as professional," said Meslay, director of The Clark. "I will miss Bob's friendship, his wonderfully wicked sense of humor and his gentle nature. A man builds his own legacy, both through words and deeds. Bob's legacy is one of great generosity and leadership, which will continue to benefit our community for generations to come."

As Meslay put it, "He truly made the Berkshires a better place through his involvement, and we are all so fortunate that he chose to shine his light upon so many programs and organizations that sustain the special nature of life here."

*<http://www.berkshireeagle.com/stories/bob-wilmers-always-had-a-soft-spot-for-the-berkshires,527832>*