

Ben Westlund
State Treasurer
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Oregon State Treasurer Ben Westlund dies of cancer

Entrepreneur and political veteran leaves a legacy of public service to Oregon families

SALEM -- In life, there are those who take the road less followed. Oregon State Treasurer Ben Westlund's was miles past where the pavement ends.

His path took him from Apple Valley, Calif; to the shores of Lake Oswego; to the painted hills of Eastern Oregon; to rural Deschutes County; and then to the statehouse, where he served as a legislator and as Treasurer.

In Central Oregon and then the Capitol, where Westlund spent much of the past 13 years since being first elected in 1996, he was known for his easygoing wit and his signature sign off: "Down the trail."

Westlund's journey ended too soon. He died early Sunday in Bend, when he lost his battle to cancer. He was 60.

The son of Long Beach oilman Bernard "Bud" Westlund, and Dorothy Reynolds Westlund, he was born Sept. 3, 1949. He spent his first 16 years in Apple Valley, Calif., where his father had a successful real estate development. His family returned to the Northwest with his two brothers. He graduated from Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash., where he earned a degree in education and history.

He helped start a successful mining venture in Christmas Valley, and then a marketing company in Portland. In the 1980s he started ranching in Eastern Oregon and named his operation High Country Herefords, and launched a cattle genetics operation in Oklahoma called Taurus. His best-known and most economically successful prize-winning Hereford bull was named Reggie.

Westlund married his wife, Libby Bishop, a high school classmate and friend, in 1987. After selling his registered Hereford herd in 1990 they settled on the Deschutes River in Tumalo, outside of Bend. They have two children; BJ, 21, and Taylor, 17. Ben dutifully called home every night at 8 p.m. during his years at the Capitol to say good night to his family.

A lifetime fan of baseball, specifically the Los Angeles Dodgers, Westlund also was part-owner in the 1990s of a minor league baseball team, the Bend Bandits. While it was fun to own a team, Ben recounted that the best part of the experience was traveling the state with his kids, watching their team play.

A friend convinced him to run for the legislature in 1996 and Westlund was elected to the Oregon Legislature House of Representatives. In 2003, he was appointed to the Senate and successfully won the seat in 2004. He quickly earned a reputation as a problem solver and as an advocate for Oregon families.

In his 12 years in the state Legislature, he was a co-chairman of the budget-drafting Joint Ways and Means Committee and championed legislation that created the State's Rainy Day Fund, Public Safety Memorial Fund and the Oregon Cultural Trust. He was the chief legislative advocate for creating the Cascades Campus of Oregon State University in Central Oregon.

He survived an initial bout with lung cancer in 2003. A political moderate who started his career as a Republican, Westlund bucked his party and was the cosponsor of legislation to give marriage-like rights to same-sex couples. He staged a brief campaign for governor as an independent in 2006.

He fought for consumer protection and was the co-author of Oregon's health system reforms in 2007, and was elected as Oregon's 27th State Treasurer in 2008. He is the only state treasurer to be elected from east of the Cascades in recent memory.

As Treasurer, he gained national attention for his initiative to expand investment transparency and led a series of reforms to increase accountability and options in the Oregon 529 College Savings Plan. He was instrumental in securing a \$20 million settlement in 2009 for families who are saving for their children's futures.

He worked to the end and he was a hands-on, creative and collaborative leader who sought to bring out the best in his staff. In the final quarter of 2009, the returns earned by the State Treasury investment division were in the top 1 percent of large public pension funds.

In his speeches, he frequently joked that while folks can learn lifelong lessons in kindergarten, you can learn a lot about being Treasurer from ranching. For instance, watch out for predators, sunshine is the best disinfectant, and watch where you step.

Westlund's legacy will live on in Oregon, in the form of the cultural trust and public safety fund, which provides money to families of officers killed or injured in the line of duty. His legacy also will live on in the memories of friends and Oregonians whose lives he touched, and those who spoke with him, or were fortunate enough to meet him in his travels down almost every road – paved or not -- across the state he loved.

Down the trail, Ben. Down the trail.

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This statement was approved by the Westlund family. Information on memorial services will be forthcoming. The family asks for privacy at this time.