



# 'Mike' McCartt transformed Talbert House

By Jennifer Baker • [jbaker@enquirer.com](mailto:jbaker@enquirer.com) • February 2, 2011

John "Mike" McCartt developed a passion to help young men coming out of prison re-enter the community as productive citizens during his early career as an assistant deputy warden at a maximum-security prison.

He grew weary of seeing prisoners at Apalachee Correctional Institution in Florida punished rather than given second chances and the opportunity to reform through counseling and alcohol and drug treatment.

So he accepted a job in Cincinnati as executive director of Talbert House, where under his vision the small halfway house with few employees and an annual \$30,000 budget grew to an agency of about 100 employees and a \$2 million budget from 1965 to 1982.

Mr. McCartt died Jan. 20 at his Westwood condominium after a 16-year battle with colon cancer that metastasized to his lungs and his bones. He was 79.

During his time at the Talbert House, he developed an array of mental health, substance abuse and community corrections programs.

Today, Talbert House has more than 600 employees serving nearly 26,000 people annually, said Neil Tilow, the current chief executive officer who took Mr. McCartt's place when he retired.

"He did so much for this community and touched so many lives," Tilow said. "Talbert House has grown into the largest community nonprofit in the region and Mike had a big part of that. Mike

gave us a great foundation to build the organization on."

Mr. McCartt was born May 29, 1931, in Altamont, Mo., and grew up in Missouri and Iowa.

During his tenure at Talbert House, he opened 10 additional programs, expanding services to women, children and families.

"Back then, we were the counselors," Mr. McCartt is quoted saying in Talbert House's 2005 annual report. "We would listen to their problems and try to build up a level of trust with them. Sometimes we were there till 8:00 at night listening and trying to help."

The bottom line was helping people.

"Ultimately, when someone graduated from school, or got a job, or a promotion, that was better than anything. That was what it was all about," McCartt said in the report. "It was an opportunity to give people a second chance."

In 1969, through a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, Mr. McCartt wrote the first book of standards for halfway houses.

Once, in the 1970s, Cincinnati's building department threatened to shut down a Talbert House residential program over some sort of

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building problem, Tilow recalled.

"He threatened to move our clients down to City Hall to sleep for the night," Tilow chuckled. "He would call the media and say, 'I'm going to take 30 people from drug treatment and move them down to City Hall. You want to come down and take pictures?'"

"He wasn't afraid to take on anybody," Tilow continued. "In fact, I think he enjoyed it. There were no sacred cows. He didn't like the authority and thought, 'I am going to stand up to you guys.'"

Building officials beat a hasty retreat.

"The building department said, 'Well, maybe it's not that serious and let's work together,' " Tilow said.

In his spare time, McCartt enjoyed traveling, particularly to Europe, cooking and gardening. He grew vegetables such as okra, corn and tomatoes, generously sharing them with family and friends.

When his cancer battle became too much for him to continue living alone, he stayed at Oak Hills Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Green Township for a couple of weeks this year. Relatives said they honored his wishes by taking him home to die.

His sister, Jean Bostwick, 80, of Mount Vernon, Iowa, remembered her brother as humble but big-hearted and the life of any party, especially at family gatherings.

"Mike was very generous with his nephews and nieces," she said. "On several occasions he sent them on European trips and every Christmas he entertained the nephews and nieces with 'Let's Make-A-Deal'-type games and jokes. He was a born entertainer. He just naturally focused on helping people: family, friends, clients and others who needed help."

In addition to his sister and niece, Mr. McCartt is

survived by several other nieces, nephews and great-nieces and nephews; former wife Ruth Tilden of Tampa; and special friends Evelyn Gerdes and Bobbie Henderson, both of Cincinnati.

He was preceded in death by his parents and a brother.

Mr. McCartt donated his body to science at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center.

Memorials: Talbert House: 2600 Victory Parkway, Cincinnati, OH 45206-1171; or Crossroads Hospice-Cincinnati: 4360 Glendale-Milford Road, Cincinnati, OH 45242-3706.

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