

Daniel C. Helix, former Concord mayor and Army general, dies at 91



(Anda Chu/Staff)

Concord City Councilmember Dan Helix poses for a photograph in the council chambers in Concord, Calif., on Friday, Nov. 9, 2012. Helix died Tuesday at the age of 91. (Anda Chu/Staff)

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PUBLISHED: March 13, 2021 at 6:05 a.m. | UPDATED: March 13, 2021 at 4:16 p.m.

CONCORD — Daniel C. Helix, a former Concord mayor and councilman who died Tuesday at age 91, did it all.

He rose to the rank of major general in the U.S. Army, served on a congressional commission, authored a novel and once received an offer to play professional baseball.

So why did the accomplished UC Berkeley grad spend the bulk of his life looking for ways to evolve the city of Concord from a quiet cluster of neighborhoods to an involved community?

“Dan was just the most loyal person,” his wife, Mary Lou, explains. “Once he was hooked into something, he was dedicated to it — he loved his city so much.”

Helix held a seat on the Concord City Council from 1968 to 1976, and then again from 2011 to 2016. He was mayor from 1972 to 1974.

During his terms, and in between, Helix pushed to expand Concord’s public amenities. He struck a deal with a developer [to build the Concord Pavilion](#), a popular venue of concerts and outdoor events. The pavilion now features a group of VIP seats at the main stage’s east end that carries the name “Daniel C. Helix Terrace.”

Council members and city staffers remember a man who sought fairness and equality at every level of public life, and a civil servant who forged friendships and mentored people.

In addition, Helix served on the BART Board of Directors, the Mt. Diablo Hospital Foundation (now called John Muir Health) and as president of the Rotary Club of Concord.

Helix is survived by Mary Lou, his wife for 67 years, his children Daniel E. Helix and Marilu Elliot, five grandchildren and two great-granddaughters.

Born Aug. 24, 1929 in Milwaukee, Dainel C. Helix moved to California when 2 years old and remained there for most of his life. He attended Berkeley High School, later returning to town to receive undergraduate degrees in history and political science, and a master's in the latter subject.



Helix joined the U.S. Army before the start of the Korean War, where he served in combat commanding a rifle company with the 45th Infantry Division. His participation later bloomed into a lengthy career that decorated him with badges, stars and a Purple Heart.

He would later take part in a congressional commission studying changes in the Department of the U.S. Army, and in 2004 published a fictional novel about the Korean War titled “The Kochi Maru Affair.”

Helix made friends wherever he served internationally, but it was while he was stationed in Japan that he found what would be a lifelong connection — an unlikely romance with the daughter of a sergeant.

“I looked at him across the room and heard violins, and there were no violins there,” Mary Lou Helix said. “We were together almost every day, and were married two and a half months later. Of course, everyone said it wouldn’t last — well, it lasted 67 years!”

Despite his deep commitment to military service, Helix still had another life to live. The passionate athlete had been a breakout star pitcher in the Army’s baseball team, and during an early furlough from service he had even been offered a contract with a \$5,000 signing bonus by the Pittsburgh Pirates, his family said.

The Korean War got in the way, but upon returning from the conflict Helix would pitch for UC Berkeley’s baseball team. He remained an avid fan of sports, watching games with his family while mentoring his grandchildren to develop a commitment to teamwork and process.

“All the games I went to with grandpa, when there was a game played really well, the way his posture would change — it wasn’t so much a star player that impressed him as it was being in the offense and going with the flow,” said Spencer Helix, a grandson.

“He would identify potential in everybody, everything,” added Helix’s son, Daniel E. Helix. “He would come out with a plan and say, ‘Here’s how I can help you.’ ”

Helix taught history and social studies for seven years at Berkeley High and coached gymnastics, going out of his way to mentor students he believed to have ambition, family members said.

But above all, Helix spotted potential in places — namely Concord, where he invested most of his time. In the early 1970s, he was instrumental in securing BART’s extension to the city.



By popular demand, Helix was appointed to a council seat in 2011, where he tapped into his institutional memory to help with the city's plans to build housing at the Concord Naval Weapons Station.

"He had an enormous wealth of knowledge," said Councilwoman Laura Hoffmeister, who served with Helix. "He had this ability to act tactically and think strategically."

In the years between his council terms, the pavilion had been renamed for sponsorships from companies, but Helix pushed to reinstate the name "Concord Pavilion," recognizing that the city's ultimate gain would be in its own brand.

Deeply involved in his faith from an early age, Helix, despite being an extrovert, presented himself with humility and modesty to whomever he met, friends and associates said.

"He truly lived his faith in an overt, unashamed way," Daniel E. Helix said of his father, who unsuccessfully pushed during his latter term [to reinstate open prayer](#) at the beginning of City Council meetings.

Helix was also active in promoting Todos Santos Plaza as the city's social hub by pushing for mixed-use development.

"He had a pro-civil rights attitude toward all minorities," said Councilman Edi Birsan, once a political opponent, who described Helix's participation in a Black community protest in South Carolina upon a visit to Mary Lou Helix's home state in the 1960s. "I'm proud to say that, at the end, we were more allies than headbangers."

As Helix left the council in 2016, he told Hoffmeister he was most proud of one accolade: the council's public employee excellence award had been named for him, a testament to his steady mentorship and push for dedication from others.

"Dan truly cared about supporting employees and took an effort to connect with all of us," City Manger Valerie Barone said. "We loved working with him, and we miss him."