

NEWS

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REMEMBERING TOM ASHER 1936-2022

Philanthropist loved city, family

By Nancy Badertscher
For the AJC

Tom Asher loved life, his family, his faith and Atlanta.

"Every single day, he was happiest and most alive when he could serve another person or a cause in our community," said Peter Berg, senior rabbi at The Temple on Peachtree Street, Asher's faith home. "With his passing, a brilliant light in our community has been extinguished."

Thomas Joseph "Tom" Asher, a fourth-generation Atlantan, businessman and community leader, died Sunday, the beginning of the eighth day of Hanukkah. He was 86. A memorial service was held Tuesday at The Temple.

Asher's roots ran deep in Atlanta, the city that he dearly loved and was always working to uplift. His great-grandfather, Jacob Elsas, founded the Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill, once the largest employer in Atlanta. Jacob Elsas also helped found three of the city's landmark institutions — the Georgia Institute of Technology, Grady Hospital, and The Temple, Atlanta's oldest Jewish congregation.

Asher was born at Emory Hospital in Atlanta on Oct. 14, 1936, and he grew up in the North Druid Hills area of Atlanta. There, he formed a lifelong friendship with playwright Alfred Uhry, best known as the author of "Driving Miss Daisy." His parents, Joseph and Helen Asher, worked at Rich's, Atlanta's iconic department store, starting in the 1920s.

Asher attended the Highland School and Marist and graduated from the Asheville School in 1954. He received his undergraduate degree in political science from Cornell University, where he met Rosalie Spring Savitt. The two married in 1959 and went on to have three children, Joey, Juliet and Hugh. He served in the Army on active duty and then as a reserve after college.



Tom Asher, 'man for all seasons,' devoted much of his life trying to make the city of his birth better.

Asher worked in the financial services industry in Atlanta for nearly 50 years, rising to executive vice president and member of the board of directors at Robinson-Humphrey. He became a national sales director at Smith Barney in 1982, after its merger with Robinson-Humphrey.

In the industry, he was referred to as "the dean" because he taught so many financial advisers how to do it right, Rabbi Berg said. "He had an international reputation in financial circles."

Asher's wife, Spring, co-wrote several books, was a television producer, and helped create Speechworks, a communications skills coaching company that has clients around the world.

"Before there was such a thing as a power couple, there was Tom and Spring Asher, both successful businesspeople and key forces underpinning culture in Atlanta," said Sheffield Hale, president and CEO of the Atlanta History Center. "Separate they were formidable, but together they were a moral and effective force for quality and change."

Asher was a cornerstone of Atlanta's nonprofit and philanthropic community. At the time of his death, he had been president and chairman of the Rich Foundation for 12 years and had been a member of its board more than 40 years. The foundation was created in 1943 to distribute a share of the former department store's profits.

Asher's deep friendship with the well-known civil rights leader Lonnie C. King Jr. shaped much of the Rich Foundation's focus in recent

years. Asher, who helped Rich's desegregate, felt it important to highlight the civil rights movement and the Atlanta Student Movement, which King founded.

"Tom shared that he was greatly changed" the day he met King, said Deva Hirsch, the Rich Foundation's current executive director.

She said she went to work this year for the foundation, in part, because of "Tom's 'man for all seasons' personality" and the organization's dedication to advancing equity in the arts, humanities, and education.

Asher was chairman of several nonprofit boards, including MedShare International, The Howard School, the Atlanta Alliance on Developmental Disabilities, the Atlanta chapter of the American Jewish Committee, the Atlanta History Center, and the Breman Jewish museum. Earlier this year, he was elected as an honorary life trustee by the Woodruff Arts Center.

Leslie Gordon, executive director of the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, said Asher made sure that the museum was able to create exhibitions that "put us on the map," whether that was through his work with the Rich Foundation or through personal contributions.

"Tom understood the need to keep history alive, helping us further our mission to connect people to Jewish history, culture, and arts," she said.

"As a native Atlantan, he was a walking encyclopedia of Jewish history in the city. And as a person centrally involved in the desegregation of Rich's, he had a deep knowledge of an experience in the Black community at the time."

He won a number of awards for his community work, including the Selig Distinguished Service Award from the American Jewish Committee in 2016. Just this month, he was recognized with

the Georgia Governor's Award for the Arts and Humanities.

In 2019, Asher helped Johnny Parham of the Thurgood Marshall Fund in New York obtain money through the Rich Foundation to set up what is now the executive leadership program at Clark Atlanta University to ensure a high level of competency in individuals aspiring to be leaders at the nation's historically black colleges and universities.

"Tom was an amazing person, always open to concepts and ideas that were designed to address the common good," Parham said.

Asher had many interests in life, including tennis and collecting things such as antique typewriters, Coca-Cola memorabilia, fountain pens, and duck decoys. "At one point, he probably had over a hundred antique typewriters," son Joey Asher said.

Family and friends described Asher as intelligent, cultured and funny. Sometimes, at a ballgame, Asher would have his family in stitches, pretending that he was selling peanuts to the crowd.

"He was a terrific dad, a role model, and, as far as I am concerned, he was a superhero," Joey Asher said.

Rabbi Berg said there's a term in Hebrew that aptly describes Asher. It's *gedolei hador*, which means one of the greatest of this generation. "He really stood out as one of the truly great souls of this generation," the rabbi said.

In addition to his wife, Asher is survived by his older brother Norman Asher (Barbara Eisenberg), his three children, Joey Asher (Johanna), of Cold Spring, New York, Hugh Asher (Kathy), of Atlanta, and daughter Dr. Juliet Asher Golden (Michael), of Atlanta, and eight grandchildren.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made to MedShare International, the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, or The Temple.