

LOCAL

Remembering Lake Lytal, a trailblazer for civil rights and recreation

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Readers: It's been a while since we last revisited the story of a prominent Palm Beach County leader whose name you likely have heard, at least indirectly. Here's more from columns in 2001 and 2011:

Seen commercials for the local law firm of Lytal, Reiter, Smith, Ivey & Fronrath? Partner Trey Lytal is Lake Lytal III. His grandfather, the original Lake Lytal, served 32 years on the Palm Beach County Commission (1942-66, 1970-78). It's a record that still stands.

Lytal, who moved from Louisiana at 12 in 1918 and graduated from Palm Beach High School in 1924, lived most of his life in Lake Clarke Shores with his wife, Ruth, a schoolteacher, who died in 1998.

Associates called him "Mr. Democrat" and described him as a politician who believed in using government to help the less fortunate. He pushed for zoning laws to control growth and also fought for the rights of women and minorities. In 1974, he was the first man in Palm Beach County to join the local chapter of the League of Women Voters.

What perhaps was his most dramatic act was one of his quietest.

People such as Lytal and Gov. LeRoy Collins (1955-61) were Southerners, raised in the era of Jim Crow. But they knew integration was coming, and Florida could accept it with a minimum of fuss or count on the world seeing ugly images that would drive away tourism for decades.

One weekend in the early 1960s, Lytal summoned workers to the Palm Beach County Courthouse, where they quietly painted over signs at drinking fountains that read "white" and "colored."

The following Monday, "I do remember there were people, after it happened, that were upset about it," lawyer Lake Lytal Jr., who had been a Florida State University student at the time of the incident, told The Palm Beach Post in 2011.

He recalled a white woman who saw a black woman in the restroom and "was going crazy." But like it or not, the woman found that county facilities had been integrated. And for good.

Lake Lytal Sr. also was a champion of recreational facilities, arguing that money spent on prisons would do more good spent on parks and playgrounds.

"Nothing causes more trouble than a lack of something to do," he once said. He also helped organize Little League baseball.

In 1975, Lake Lytal County Park, on Gun Club Road in suburban West Palm Beach, was named for him. Then 68, he leaped from the high dive to celebrate.

He died at 85 in 1992. More than 400 people went to his funeral.

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