

Bish's accomplishments on both national, local levels

By Carol Bryant

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Milan D. Bish rose from a humble start on a farm near Giltner to a long friendship with President Ronald Reagan, who appointed Bish as U.S. Ambassador to the Eastern Caribbean and sought Bish's advice.

Bish was born July 1, 1929, on the family farm near Giltner to Charles and Mabel (Williams) Bish. He and his parents moved to Grand Island in 1935 because of the Depression.

He attended school in Grand Island, including Dodge Elementary School and Walnut Junior High School. He met his future wife, Allene, when they were in the first grade at Dodge School. He graduated from Grand Island Senior High in 1947. While in high school, he and other friends formed the "Green Terror Gang."

Bish received a bachelor's degree in economic theory from Hastings College in 1951.

He married Allene Miller on March 17, 1951, in Grand Island. They celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary this year.

He worked with his parents at Bish Machinery Co. selling farm implements from 1951 to 1973 and served as president of the company. Bish was president of the Grand Island Rotary Club in 1964 and served as Rotary Club's district governor in 1970.

Bish was chairman of Nebraska's Republican Party from 1971 to 1973. After selling Bish Machinery Co. in 1973, Bish founded Mid-Continent Enterprises in 1974 and remained as president until 1981. The development and property management company constructed properties worth more than \$40 million, including the Continental Gardens development in northwest Grand Island.

Bish met Ronald Reagan on Feb. 14, 1975, when Reagan spoke at the Grand Island Area Chamber of Commerce annual meeting. That meeting led to involvement in Reagan's campaigns for president. Bish served as chairman for the Reagan for president campaigns in Nebraska in 1975-1976 and 1979-1980. Bish also served as the regional political director for the Reagan presidential campaign in 1980, covering Nebraska, Kansas and South Dakota. Bish was president of the Grand Island Area Chamber of Commerce from 1978 to 1979.

Bish served on Reagan's presidential transition team from November 1980 through February 1981. The Nebraskan was sworn in as U.S. Ambassador to the Eastern Caribbean on Nov. 25, 1981, and represented the United States in Eastern Caribbean islands -- Barbados, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Antigua-Barbuda, Dominica, the Grenadines and St. Christopher-Nevis. Milan and Allene Bish lived in Barbados while he served as ambassador.

President Ronald and Nancy Reagan visited the Bishes in Barbados in April 1982. The United States decided to intervene in Grenada after Grenada Prime Minister Maurice Bishop was assassinated on Oct. 19, 1983. United States troops landed in Grenada on Oct. 25, 1983. Bish was involved in United States decision making during the Grenada intervention.

Bish finished his tenure as ambassador on April 1, 1984. In 1984 he received the Superior Honor Group Award from the U.S. State Department and the Intelligence Medallion Award from the CIA.

After returning to Grand Island, Bish became president of Bish Inc., a public affairs consulting firm that negotiated real estate syndications and managed personal investments. He received the award of excellence from the Grand Island Area Chamber of Commerce in 1984. He became vice chairman of the board of directors for Overland National Bank in Grand Island in 1986. He worked as the administrative assistant for 3rd District U.S. Rep. Virginia Smith from 1986 to 1991.

Bish received an Outstanding Alumnus Award from Hastings College in 1986, served as the college's Alumni Association president from 1986 to 1988, was inducted into the Grand Island Senior High Hall of Honor in May 1987 and was named The Grand Island Independent's Man of the Year in 1992.

Bish was instrumental in the development of College Park in Grand Island and was secretary of its board of directors from 1989 to 1991. Bish was chairman of the Grand Island Industrial Foundation from 1989 to 1990. He has served on boards for Crane Meadows Nature Center and the Community Humanitarian Resource Center.

Bish also was a Nebraska State Patrol Foundation trustee, St. Francis Medical Center board member, Statue of Liberty/Ellis Island Centennial Commission committee member and Nebraska Department of Roads commissioner. He was a member of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.

Bish was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1983, with Parkinson's disease in 1992 and with bone cancer in May 2000. Bish's biography, "Milan Bish: The Measure You Give," was published in December 2000.

Bish's survivors include his wife, Allene; one son and daughter-in-law, Chuck and Janelle Bish of Grand Island; two daughters and sons-in-law, Cindy and Ralph Russell of Aurora, Ill., and Linda and David Delehant of Sacramento, Calif.; and five grandchildren.