

Brandt, Edward R.



age 81, of Mpls., passed away peacefully after a long illness on January 17, 2013. Preceded in death by his son, Bruce and sister Jessie. Survived by his wife of 60 years, Marie; daughters, Rose Brandt and Eileen Johnson; son, Douglas; son-in-law, Steve Johnson; granddaughters, Rachel Damiani and Christine Winckler; grandsons-in-law, Austin Damiani and Brandon Kier; great-granddaughter, Elora Damiani; and siblings, Bill, Lena, Evelyn, Nettie, Elma, Mary and Carolyn.

Ed was born to a Mennonite family in southwestern Kansas during the Dust Bowl, although he was raised in the small farming town of Steinbach, Manitoba. As the eldest of nine children, he helped his mother, who was often ill, by taking care of his younger siblings. This was the start of a lifelong love of children and family, which brought him great joy.

Until he was 8 years old, Ed spoke only low German, an unwritten dialect, but he ended up fluent in standard German as well as English, which he first learned in school. Although the Mennonites typically only attended school until the 8th grade, from an early age Ed was a devoted reader and scholar; his high school nickname was "the Professor." He knew that he didn't want to be a farmer, and dreamed of seeing the world.

Working entirely on his own initiative, Ed completed his high school education by taking mail order classes. After graduation he taught for a year in a one-room school in rural Saskatchewan. In 1953, Ed married the love of his life, Marie Schmidtke. As the years went by, it was her dedicated support that allowed him to follow his dreams wherever they led.

When Ed earned his BA summa cum laude in 1954, he was the first in his community to graduate from college; he would later earn an MA and a PhD. In 1958 he began a 10-year career as a foreign service officer for the U.S. Information Agency (part of the State Department), and realized his dream of seeing the world through postings in Dacca, Bangladesh (then known as East Pakistan), and several postings in Germany. Everywhere he lived he took the opportunity to travel widely, especially throughout Europe.

While posted in Washington DC in 1963, Ed took part in the March on Washington, where he witnessed the "I have a dream" speech of Martin Luther King, Jr., who was one of his heroes. When they moved in 1965, Ed and Marie took the pioneering step of selling their home in a white neighborhood to a black family, which made them a target of harassment.

On returning to Minnesota in the late 60s, Ed became involved in local politics, serving as the state representative for SE and NE Mpls from 1968 through 1972. His greatest public service achievement was his leadership in non-smokers rights; he co-founded and was the first president of the Association of Non-Smokers Rights (ANSR). Both in and out of the legislature, he tirelessly led the drive that resulted in the 1975 passage of the bill he had written, the Minnesota Clean Indoor Air Act, which was the first non-smokers rights legislation in the US.

After he received his doctorate in 1970, Ed began a 20-year career teaching political science, with his happiest years spent on the faculty of the University of St. Thomas in the 1970s.

Upon retiring from teaching in 1992, Ed found a new passion as a Germanic genealogist. He co-founded the Germanic Genealogy Society and the multinational Federation of East European Family History Societies, serving in a leadership capacity in both organizations. He became a leading authority on Germanic genealogy, authoring several books that presented groundbreaking research. As a specialist in deciphering the Gothic script used in old documents, he was able to research original historical records in Germany, Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, France, and Poland. Ed continued working until the last year, when he slowed down as his illness progressed.

His family will remember Ed's gentle, loving heart and immense curiosity about the world, as well as his brilliant intellect and achievements. In every area that caught his interest, he took a leadership role and broke new ground. The world is a better place because of his passion and devotion, wherever he was called.

Memorial service 11 am Sun., Jan. 27, Germanic-American Institute, 301 Summit Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55102, 651-222-7027. Memorials to St. Stephen's Human Services, ststephensmpls.org