

Bill Hollingshead
May 24, 1937 – February 1, 2021



William T (Bill) Hollingshead, 83, passed away peacefully on February 1, 2021, in Davis, CA after a brief illness.

Born May 24, 1937, at the old Woodland Clinic Hospital and raised in Woodland, Bill had a knack for entertaining from an early age. He told of “singing a little song for Mr. McNary” as he walked by the Hollingshead studio after work.

When he was rewarded with 25 cents, he realized he was “on to something.”

After graduating from Woodland High School in 1955, Bill went to UC Davis, where he designed halftime shows for the band. A lifelong saxophone and clarinet player, he transferred to UC Berkeley for a year to play in their marching band, going to the Brussels World’s Fair in 1958 and marching in the parade and halftime at the 1959 Rose Bowl.

He was drafted into the US Army after graduating from UCD. He was proud to be able to serve his country and was accepted into the prestigious Continental Army Command Band.

After his active duty, he revived his college comedy/magic act and toured Europe across both sides of the Iron Curtain. When he returned to the US, his band, Bill Hollingshead and the Headlights, and his magic acts were staples of the Northern California entertainment scene.

It was around this time that Bill discovered the magic of monsters, and set out on a unique career path. “I used to be in the circus/carnival circuit, across the US and Canada,” he said. “We had the rights to present Frankenstein, Wolfman, Dracula and the Mummy.” Later, applying as director of entertainment for San Diego’s 200th Anniversary celebration. the hiring supervisor said, “You’re just what I’m looking for – a carny with a college degree.” Next was a stint at Sea World where, among other things, Bill “scripted” dolphin shows.

When he arrived at Knott’s Berry Farm in the early 1970s, Bill used the monster characters he’d met over the years to create the Knott’s Berry Farm Halloween Haunt, which debuted in 1973, and is now the largest and longest running Scary Show in America. He also managed the summer concert series. After booking such acts as The Everly Brothers, Johnny Cash, Carl Perkins, and Pat Boone for Knott’s, Bill had an epiphany that led him to start his own music production and talent agency, Bill Hollingshead Productions, Inc.

While watching a Jan and Dean concert, he saw the power of the connection between an audience and the hits of their youth. Bill brought Jan & Dean back into national prominence. Playing sax with them regularly, he was dubbed “The Incredible Honk.” He went on to promote revival tours with Frankie Avalon, The Kingsmen, The Chantays, Fabian, The Surfariis and other early rock and roll icons. When Chuck Berry needed a sax player at a concert, Bill stepped in and earned a “rare complimentary nod from Chuck Berry himself.”

An irrepressible storyteller, Bill’s all-time favorite story was that of his young affection, rediscovery, and marriage to Sharon Dianne Fritter Escardo in 2004. The pair went steady at Woodland High School, but as Bill was headed to college, they drifted apart. Fifty years later, they reconnected at a high school reunion.

On retirement, Bill was always working on a project. A 1951 polio survivor, Bill lectured at the UCD Med Center giving a first-hand account of polio and spearheaded the Davis Rotary’s PolioPlus initiative, public speaking, and visiting Ghana to administer vaccines. In 2009, Bill was recognized by Rotary International for raising over \$1 million for polio eradication. In 2011, he received the American Red Cross Hero of the Year Award.

At UCD, he joined the Alumni Band and the Concert Band. He also supported the Music Recital Hall, the Symphony Orchestra, going on their four-concert tour of Spain, and lectured on “The History of Rock & Roll.” Bill received the distinguished Aggie Service Award in 2012.

Bill organized and displayed the vast historical photography legacy built around the life work of his father, Paul W Hollingshead, who was an apprentice to New York fashion photographer Edward Steichen before settling in Woodland in the 1930s. The photographs range from stunning fashion portraits to a world class chronicle of small-town USA. Bill was instrumental in securing Paul W Hollingshead’s admission into the New York Institute of Photography Hall of Fame in 2014.



The life and character of Bill Hollingshead was small town values, coupled with achievements on major national stages, with a performer’s flair for stories, music, magic and word play. He was a generous and loyal soul, with the “twinkle in the eye” of someone truly exceptional. He will be remembered by all for his sense of humor, and probably a horrendous joke, or pun, or two.

Bill was preceded in death by his parents Paul W and Vera Tilly Hollingshead and his brother Edward P Hollingshead. He is survived by Sharon Dianne (Fritter) Escardo Hollingshead, his wife of 17 years, his step children Luis Enrique Escardo, Katerina Escardo Govoni, and grandson Aiden Enrique Govoni. Also surviving are his sister-in-law Victoria (Foster) Hollingshead, and a numerous, loving Hollingshead family.

A private graveside service was held February 11, 2021 at the Woodland Cemetery with Military Honors.

Donations may be made to PolioPlus, with checks made out to Rotary International Foundation, Memo: PolioPlus, In memory of Bill Hollingshead, and mailed to Rotary Club of Davis, PO Box 185, Davis CA 95617, or to support music in local schools, with checks to Bill Hollingshead Music Fund and mailed to 1010 Anderson Rd, Davis CA 95616.

A Memorial Service and gathering will be scheduled at a later date.