Urban Legends

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he line of alumni who have given to Rutgers over the decades is long and distinguished—and it points directly to the university’s standing today. But it is the rare graduate who has affected not only the university, but also one of its host cities.

In the case of two men who recently passed away (within eight days of each other), it was Clement A. Price and John J. Heldrich and his concern for New Brunswick. They understood the importance of the cities’ prosperity and reputation for its residents and for New Jersey, and they realized the value of Rutgers in these communities.

Price GSNB’75, the Rutgers Board of Governors Distinguished Service Professor of History, taught at Rutgers University–Newark for 45 years and was one of the most popular, and beloved, people on campus. Heldrich was an executive with Johnson & Johnson for 41 years.

Price was easy to spot on campus and in the city, a big, gentle man with a bemused smile and a twinkle in his eye who had the rare ability to bring the leaders of the city together. “He was admired precisely because he carried himself in a way that was a bit contrary to the image of Newark,” says Rev. Dr. M. William Howard Jr., the pastor of Newark’s Bethany Baptist Church and former chair of the Rutgers Board of Governors. “He was anything but confrontational; he was eager to reconcile conflicting parties. Clerm could interact with them all.”

A native of Washington, D.C., Price had adopted Newark as his home close to half a century ago, teaching at Rutgers–Newark for 45 years and living in a brownstone near Newark’s Lincoln Park with his wife, Mary Sue Sweeney, the former director of the Newark Museum. Arriving shortly after the riots of 1967, he rejected the idea that the turmoil had led to the demise of the city. “I was told when I came here, ‘We’re going to make it here.’ I don’t think anyone who wanted to know about the city’s history.”

A native of New Brunswick, he also served on the board of trustees for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and leader for two decades of New Brunswick Tomorrow, an organization that partners with the city’s public and private institutions to address health, human service, and social issues in New Brunswick and enhances the city’s economic, social, and cultural vitality, from job growth and improved neighborhoods to a renaissance of the business district. Born in New Brunswick, he also served on the board of trustees for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Heldrich, who was age 88, was also the founding chair and leader for two decades of New Brunswick Tomorrow, the nonprofit organization that partners with the city’s public and private institutions to address health, human service, and social issues in New Brunswick and enhances the city’s economic, social, and cultural vitality, from job growth and improved neighborhoods to a renaissance of the business district.

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Clement A. Price

Not long before his untimely death at age 69, Clement A. Price had been named the official historian of Newark by then mayor, Luis Quintana, who had also appointed Price to chair the committee responsible for organizing observances of Newark’s 350th anniversary in 2016. No one could have been better suited for the jobs. “Clerm Price knew more—and cared more—about the history of the city of Newark than any person living on the planet,” says Jan Ellen Lewis, a professor of history and dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University–Newark. “He was a walking encyclopedia, but one whose pages were always open, ready to be read by anyone who wanted to know about the city’s history.”

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(See Clement A. Price on page 101)

John J. Heldrich

One can’t rightly discuss New Brunswick today without acknowledging the contributions of John J. Heldrich.

An executive for 41 years with Johnson & Johnson, the pharmaceutical giant headquartered in the city, Heldrich is considered the driving force behind the revitalization of New Brunswick.

“John Heldrich was a modest person, but he had grand ambitions for New Brunswick,” says Carl Van Horn, a professor at the Bloustein School and the director of the school’s John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development. “Over a period of nearly 40 years, he made enormous, transformational impacts on things that made New Brunswick what it is today: educating and training people for careers; strengthening the city’s economy, neighborhoods, and health care services; and developing thriving arts and cultural institutions.

John is the only person who could have brought all of those different interests together to work toward a common mission to benefit the city, the university, hospitals, the cultural community, community groups, and Johnson & Johnson. He is irreplaceable.”

(See John J. Heldrich on page 101)
Clement A. Price

the blacks destroyed the city,” he said in an interview with Esquire magazine in 2008. “Part of me said, ‘I didn’t know we were that efficient.’” He rarely passed on the chance to tout the city and to shed his light on the historical record of Newark.

“He was clearly a champion of Newark—but not a naive champion,” says Howard. “You couldn’t separate his hope for Newark from his personality. He was a cheerleader for not just the city in general, but also for its personalities and operators.”

Price, among the first three African Americans to receive a Ph.D. in history from Rutgers, was the cofounding director of the Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience at Rutgers–Newark, which hosts each February the highly regarded Marion Thompson Wright Lecture, now, after 35 years, an institution in Newark. (In 2010, Price gave the university a $100,000 gift to establish an endowment to ensure the continuation of the lecture series.) “Clem was a public historian who believed that knowledge was to be shared and that knowledge was vital to democracy,” says Lewis. “He was one of the finest public historians in the nation; he showed us all what public history truly means. Clem’s conviction was that the best contemporary scholarship on race, ethnicity, history, and urban and public affairs not only could but must be shared with the public. And he demonstrated on a daily basis how this could be done.”

Price also understood the value of the arts for the city and beyond. A supporter of Newark landmarks, he was the chair of the New Jersey State Council on the Arts; trustee of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation; president of the Newark Education Trust, chair of the Save Ellis Island Foundation; and an adviser to the National Museum of African-American History and Culture at the Smithsonian Institution. In 2011, President Obama appointed him vice chair of the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.


“Clem’s erudition, his kindness, his discretion, and his good humor,” says Lewis, “made him a personality that any city would love to have as its face.”

John J. Heldrich

a generous supporter of the city and its institutions, and Heldrich was a board member of the New Brunswick Development Corporation (DEVCO), which has played a pivotal role in the physical rehabilitation of the city.

“John was the perfect man to take a leadership role in the city’s revitalization,” says Christopher Paladino RC’82, CLAW’85, the president of DEVCO. “He had personal context, passion, and, as a member of the Johnson & Johnson executive committee, influence and resources. One of his greatest contributions was his ability to motivate individuals with disparate interests to focus on a common agenda. He got people to talk, and he encouraged people to discuss not just our challenges, but also our vision, hopes, and dreams.”

Heldrich and his wife, the late Regina B. Heldrich, who died in early 2014 at age 92, shared a passion for the arts. He was the chair of the New Brunswick Cultural Center, which championed the Crossroads Theatre Company, the State Theatre, and George Street Playhouse—all residing across Livingston Avenue from the majestic hotel that symbolizes the city’s vitality: the Heldrich. Regina DC’42, after whom a lobby in the State Theatre is named, was honored in 2002 by the Zimmerli Art Museum for her support. A devout horticulturist as well, she was a force in the New Brunswick Blossoms program to beautify the city. She was a supporter of Douglass Residential College, which awarded her the Douglass Medal in 2007. A chemistry major as an undergraduate, Regina later funded a major renovation of the Douglass chemistry building, believing that women should strive for careers in the sciences.

John and Regina were active parishioners of St. Paul the Apostle R.C. Church (now Transfiguration of the Lord Parish) in Highland Park, New Jersey, their longtime residence, and were generous supporters of Saint Peter’s University Hospital in New Brunswick, for which they were awarded the hospital foundation’s Annual Bishop’s Award.

“Everybody trusted John Heldrich,” says Van Horn. “He had a steady moral compass about what was right and wrong. He was a man of his word. He was also a very generous person, not just by providing financial support, but also by donating countless hours to Rutgers, his church, his community, and his state. John’s commitment and compassion were inspiring and infectious to all who met him.”