

James A. Brennan Jr., 95, aide to Claude Pepper

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Michele Edmunds / Claude Pepper Foundation

James A. Brennan Jr., former aide to Congressman Claude Pepper, died at 95 in Coral Gables on Dec. 20.

James Anthony Brennan, Jr., a close advisor to the late U.S. Rep. Claude D. Pepper and prolific builder of structures for the Catholic Church in Florida, died Dec. 20 of complications from heart surgery.

He was 95, and a Coral Gables resident since 1958.

“Jim” Brennan was married for 66 years to the former Yolanda Rodriguez, a Panamanian diplomat’s daughter who was attending the University of Miami law school when they met. They wed in Miami Beach in 1945 and had 12 children between 1946 and 1963, when their last child, son Leo, died shortly after birth.

Born July 18, 1916, in Youngstown, Ohio, Brennan had health problems as a child that brought the family to the warmth of Miami. The same problems kept Brennan, who was educated at the University of Havana, out of World War II, according to his children.

Brennan was Pepper’s longtime “man in Miami,” helping shape the congressman’s positions on everything from protecting the elderly to fighting street crime — the latter because Brennan was

mugged walking to Pepper’s Washington, D.C., apartment in 1966.

Pepper, a New Deal Democrat who served in the U.S. Senate from 1937 to 1951, was best known as a champion of the Social Security system and dignity for the elderly. Brennan worked for him when Pepper served in the House, from 1963 until his death in 1989.

He was especially influential as Pepper’s assistant when the congressman chaired the House Rules Committee and the House Select Committee on Aging.

After Pepper died, Brennan joined the board of the Tallahassee-based Claude Pepper

Foundation, helping refine its mission of preserving Pepper's legacy and supporting the causes — human-services and social justice — close to the hearts of Pepper and his late wife, Mildred.

A devout Catholic, Brennan was close to the late Archbishop Joseph Patrick Hurley, who oversaw all of Florida as head of its single diocese in the 1950s and early '60s. He brought Pepper and Hurley together, which shored up Pepper's support among Catholic voters.

Hurley, who led the Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Augustine, hired Brennan Construction Corp. to build dozens of churches and school buildings from Jacksonville to Tampa to Miami-Dade County, including Miami's Archbishop Curley High School for Boys and Notre Dame High School for Girls; Fort Lauderdale's St. Sebastian Church; the school at Hollywood's Church of the Little Flower; Assumption Church in Pompano Beach; and St. John's Church in Hialeah, where the Brennan family lived before moving to the Gables.

A familiar sight

Everyone knew the Brennan house, son Joseph Brennan said.

"For years, a Caddy limo — the kind that President Kennedy used — sat in front of the house on the corner of Granada and Anastasia. It was an icon" used to transport Joseph and his 10 siblings to parochial schools, and to Lummus Park in Miami Beach on Sundays after church.

About a month before his death, Brennan was honored during Founders Day at Barry University, where his firm built several campus buildings while it was still Barry College. His daughter Jean Marie Alvarez of Winter Park, known as "Missy," said that Barry is planning to archive her father's papers.

Among Brennan's recruits to Pepper's causes: Robert Weiner, former chief of staff for the House Committee on Aging under Pepper.

People skills

Weiner said that Brennan "had an innate sense of people and politics, and a fearless desire to improve the country that Pepper valued and respected. Jim would come into meetings with a mission and with visions of what needed to be done, by whom, and how."

Brennan had "incredible people skills, sensing who was effective and who was just a talker," Weiner added.

He worked into the last year of his life as a consultant to sons Joseph and Thomas's Brennan Realty of Coral Gables.

In addition to his wife, daughter Missy, sons Joseph and Thomas, and 28 grandchildren, Brennan is survived by sons James Brennan III and Barry Brennan, and daughter Nina Kennedy, all of Miami; daughters Yolanda Kahle of Winter Park, Margarita Wells of Orlando, Mary Anne Bougon of St. George Island, near Apalachicola, and Anne Savoldy of Fort Lauderdale. Son Manuel Felipe Brennan died in 2009.

A viewing will be held 7 to 10 p.m. Tuesday at Van Orsdel Funeral Home, 4600 SW 8th St., followed by 11 a.m. funeral services Wednesday at the Church of the Little Flower, 2711 Indian

Mound Trl., Coral Gables. Burial follows at Woodlawn Memorial Park.

The family suggests memorial donations to The Claude Pepper Foundation, 636 W. Call St., Tallahassee, FL 32306-1122.

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